Supreme Court, U.S.
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No. 05-_____

In The
Supreme Court of the United States

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California,

Petitioner,

v.

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORPORATION OF AMERICA, US BRANCH, et al.,

Respondents.

On Petition For A Writ Of Certiorari To The United States Court Of Appeals For The Ninth Circuit

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

The questions presented are:

1. Whether a plaintiff who has lost his 42 U.S.C. § 1983 civil rights claim on the merits in the lower court may nevertheless be assumed to have prevailed on that claim for purposes of awarding attorneys' fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 when a reviewing court declines to rule on that failed claim.

2. Whether this Court's grant of certiorari on a Section 1983 claim that the petitioner lost in the court of appeals creates an assumption for purposes of awarding fees that the petitioner prevailed on that claim when this Court ultimately does not decide that claim.

3. Whether the federal government's preemption of a state statute through the exercise of its foreign affairs power creates individual Section 1983 rights for a plaintiff challenging the statute on such preemption grounds, thereby providing a basis for attorneys' fees under Section 1988.

LIST OF PARTIES

The petitioner is John Garamendi in his capacity as the Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California.

The respondents are: Gerling Global Reinsurance Corporation of America, US Branch; Gerling Global Life Reinsurance Company; Gerling Global Life Insurance Company; Gerling America Insurance Company; Constitution Insurance Company; Revios Reinsurance Canada, Ltd.; Revios Reinsurance U.S., Inc.; Assucrazioni Generali S.P.A.; American Insurance Association; and American Re-Insurance Company.

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OPINIONS BELOW

The initial opinion of the court of appeals reversing the district court's decision denying attorneys' fees to respondents is reported at 400 F.3d 803. That opinion was amended in connection with the court of appeals' order denying the Commissioner's petition for rehearing. That order is reported at 410 F.3d 531. The opinion as amended appears in the Appendix (App., *infra*, 1-19). The district court's opinion denying attorneys' fees (App., *infra*, 20-26) is unpublished. The opinion of the court of appeals reversing the district court's permanent injunction and granting the Commissioner summary judgment is reported at 296 F.3d 832. The opinion of the court of appeals reviewing the district court's preliminary injunction is reported at 240 F.3d 739.

JURISDICTION

The judgment of the court of appeals was entered on March 10, 2005. The court of appeals denied rehearing on June 3, 2005. App., *infra*, 3-4. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED

The relevant text of 42 U.S.C. § 1983 and 42 U.S.C. § 1988 is set forth in the Appendix (App., *infra*, 27-28).

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

The Ninth Circuit has held that this Court's disposition of *American Insurance Ass'n, et al. v. Garamendi*, 539 U.S. 396 (2003), entitles the respondents, a number of insurance companies and an insurance trade association (the "insurers"), to recover attorneys' fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1988. The Ninth Circuit's decision will wrongly result in the payment of millions of dollars of California taxpayers' money to companies that have repeatedly refused to provide Holocaust survivors with critical insurance policy information.

To be entitled to fees here, the insurers were required to be "prevailing parties" on their 42 U.S.C. § 1983 civil rights claims. The insurers did not prevail on those claims. To the contrary, they lost all of their Section 1983 claims on the merits in the Ninth Circuit, and this Court did not disturb those rulings. The insurers did not vindicate any right, privilege or immunity recognized by Section 1983. They are not civil rights victims.

Nevertheless, the Ninth Circuit has now determined that the insurers are entitled to fees despite their loss on all their Section 1983 claims. The Ninth Circuit reached that erroneous conclusion based on (1) the insurers' success in this Court on a claim – foreign affairs preemption – that does *not* entitle them to fees, and (2) this Court's grant of certiorari on their unsuccessful Section 1983 claims – due process and Commerce Clause – and its subsequent decision not to reach those claims. The Ninth Circuit came to this unprecedented conclusion both because it misconstrued and improperly extended a decision of this Court, *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122 (1980), and because it incorrectly attributed fee significance to this Court's grant of certiorari on Section 1983 claims and its subsequent decision not to address those

claims. The right to Section 1988 attorneys' fees and the intrusion on this Court's discretionary review process are questions of exceptional importance.

The insurers had sued the Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California (the "Commissioner") in four consolidated lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of California's Holocaust Victim Insurance Relief Act, Cal. Ins. Code §§ 13800-13807 (the "HVIRA"). That statute required insurers doing business in California to report information about insurance policies sold by them or related companies in Europe between 1920 and 1945, which would have provided the thousands of Holocaust survivors living in California and their heirs with information necessary to file claims under such policies if they chose to do so. As members of this Court themselves recognized, the HVIRA was enacted following evidence of persistent wrongdoing by insurance companies and the decades-long inability of Holocaust survivors and their families to obtain basic information about insurance policies that may have been issued to Holocaust victims. See *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 430-434 (Ginsberg, J., dissenting).

The insurers refused to provide this information and instead sought a declaration that the HVIRA was unconstitutional and an injunction barring the Commissioner from enforcing it.[1] The insurers alleged a variety of constitutional infirmities, including assertions that the statute interfered with the federal government's exercise of its foreign affairs power, violated the Commerce Clause, the Due Process Clause, the Equal Protection Clause, the

[1] The insurers sought relief under both the Declaratory Judgment Act, 28 U.S.C. §§ 2201, *et seq.*, and the Civil Rights Act, 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

Contracts Clause, the Fourth Amendment, and was a bill of attainder.

The district court, ruling on the insurers' foreign affairs and Commerce Clause claims, preliminarily enjoined enforcement of the HVIRA. The Commissioner appealed, and the Ninth Circuit issued a decision that rejected both of those claims, but left the injunction in place and remanded the case for consideration of the insurers' due process claim. *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. v. Low*, 240 F.3d 739 (9th Cir. 2001) ("*Gerling I*"). On remand, the insurers and the Commissioner each moved for summary judgment. The district court granted the insurers' motion for summary judgment on procedural due process grounds, denied the Commissioner's motion, and enjoined the Commissioner from enforcing the HVIRA.

The insurers then moved the district court for an order that they were entitled to recover attorneys' fees pursuant to Section 1988. The district court, exercising its discretion, denied the insurers' motion for fees. Although it found that the insurers were the prevailing parties, the district court nevertheless concluded that there were special circumstances that would render an award of fees unjust in this case.

The Commissioner appealed to the Ninth Circuit from the grant of summary judgment to the insurers and the denial of his motion for summary judgment. The insurers cross-appealed from the denial of their motion for attorneys' fees.

In *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. v. Low*, 296 F.3d 832 (9th Cir. 2002) ("*Gerling II*"), the Ninth Circuit, ruling that the HVIRA did not violate the Due Process Clause, reversed the grant of summary judgment

for the insurers and directed that summary judgment be granted for the Commissioner on all the insurers' claims for relief. As such, the Ninth Circuit ruled that the insurers were not "prevailing parties" for purposes of Section 1988, and accordingly held that the insurers were not entitled to fees. *Gerling II*, 296 F.3d at 851.

The insurers, supported by the federal government as *amicus*, petitioned this Court for a writ of certiorari, contending that the HVIRA was unconstitutional because it (i) interfered with the federal government's exercise of its power over foreign affairs, (ii) violated due process, and (iii) violated the Commerce Clause. The insurers did not petition this Court for review of the Ninth Circuit's disposition of their other constitutional claims or the attorneys' fees issue.

This Court granted certiorari on all three questions presented, but issued a decision on June 23, 2003, holding only that the HVIRA was preempted because it conflicted with the federal government's foreign policy initiatives directed to Holocaust-related insurance claims. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 401.[2] Because this Court disposed of the case on foreign affairs preemption grounds, this Court expressly did not address the due process and Commerce Clause claims. *Id.* at 413 n.7.

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[2] Even so, this Court's majority acknowledged that there were "powerful arguments" made as to why the HVIRA's approach would work better than the Executive Branch's approach, and that the HVIRA's approach might be "the preferable policy" were it not for consideration of other issues involving this country's relations with its European allies. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 427. Four Justices dissented and voted to affirm the Ninth Circuit's judgment and uphold the HVIRA. *Id.* at 430-443.

Following the insurers' success on their foreign affairs preemption claim in this Court, they again moved for attorneys' fees pursuant to Section 1988. The Ninth Circuit transferred the question of fees to the district court, which again ruled that the insurers were not entitled to fees. App., *infra*, 20-26. The district court correctly found that the preemption of the HVIRA by the federal government's exercise of its foreign affairs power did not implicate a right, privilege or immunity recognized by Section 1983 so as to support a Section 1988 fee award. App., *infra*, 24-26. The district court also correctly found that even though the Commerce Clause and Due Process Clause might be bases for a Section 1983 claim, the insurers had not prevailed on either of those claims because the Ninth Circuit had already held that the HVIRA did not violate those constitutional provisions. App., *infra*, 26. The district court recognized that this Court expressly had not considered or decided the Commerce Clause or due process issues. App., *infra*, 24.

The insurers appealed the district court's denial of their fees to the Ninth Circuit, which reversed. *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. v. Garamendi*, 400 F.3d 803 (9th Cir. 2005), rehearing denied, as amended, 410 F.3d 531 (9th Cir. 2005) ("*Gerling III*"). App., *infra*, 1-19. The Ninth Circuit held that although the insurers had not prevailed on their due process and Commerce Clause claims, they were nevertheless entitled to an award of fees under Section 1988.

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

The Ninth Circuit's unprecedented extension of *Maher* permits a plaintiff who litigates and loses his Section 1983 claim on the merits to nevertheless recover fees under Section 1988. *Maher*, however, held only that a plaintiff whose Section 1983 claim was never ruled upon for prudential reasons could under certain circumstances be assumed to have prevailed on that claim. The Ninth Circuit's new rule expanding the availability of attorneys' fees is an unwarranted departure from the settled boundaries of *Maher*, is not supported by the language or legislative history of Section 1988, conflicts in principle with the decisions of this Court and others, and will have distorting effects on Section 1983 litigation. The decision also impermissibly intrudes on this Court's certiorari process by attributing legal significance to this Court's decision to grant certiorari on the insurers' Section 1983 claims and its subsequent decision not to address those claims.

1. Contrary to the Ninth Circuit's decision, the essential predicate for an attorneys' fee award pursuant to Section 1988 is prevailing on a Section 1983 claim, and not simply victory in the case. See *Nat'l Private Truck Council, Inc. v. Okla. Tax Comm'n*, 515 U.S. 582, 592 (1995); cf. *Buckhannon Bd. & Care Home, Inc. v. W. Va. Dep't of Health & Human Res.*, 532 U.S. 598, 600 (2001); *NOW v. Operation Rescue*, 37 F.3d 646, 653-654 (D.C. Cir. 1994). *Maher* created a limited "prevailing party" assumption for purposes of awarding Section 1988 fees. Relying on the legislative history of Section 1988, this Court held in *Maher* that a fee award may be permitted in certain circumstances, as a matter of fairness, where a plaintiff has been precluded from obtaining any ruling on his Section 1983 claim.

To qualify for fees under *Maher*, a plaintiff must prevail on a non-fee bearing claim that is factually related to a "substantial" Section 1983 claim that was never decided for prudential reasons. In those limited circumstances, *Maher* permits courts to assume that the plaintiff would have prevailed on the Section 1983 claim had the plaintiff been allowed to litigate that claim to adjudication.

That assumption, however, is not warranted where the plaintiff has actually litigated, and lost, his Section 1983 claim. Under such circumstances, there is no basis to support the different assumption that the lower court was wrong and that the plaintiff would have prevailed in a higher court on his failed Section 1983 claim had that court addressed it.

Here, the insurers litigated and lost all of their Section 1983 claims in the Ninth Circuit. They ultimately prevailed in this litigation because this Court ruled in their favor only on the claim that California was intruding on the Executive Branch's conduct of foreign affairs – a non-fee bearing claim.[3] *Maher* does not apply to these circumstances, and there is no public policy reason for assuming that a plaintiff has prevailed on a Section 1983 claim where a court has already held that the plaintiff has not vindicated any Section 1983 right and has instead determined that no such right exists.

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[3] Judge Graber's concurring opinion in *Gerling III* expressly recognized that such foreign affairs preemption does not create individual Section 1983 rights (App., *infra*, 18), and the Ninth Circuit panel majority in that decision assumed, but did not decide, the same thing. App., *infra*, 9 and 17.

Nevertheless, purporting to rely on *Maher*, the Ninth Circuit has established a new rule for fee awards that ignores and makes irrelevant the fact that a plaintiff litigated and lost his Section 1983 claim. So long as the plaintiff prevails on a non-fee bearing claim and the failed Section 1983 claim is "substantial" (*i.e.*, not frivolous) and "unaddressed" by a reviewing court, the plaintiff will be assumed to have prevailed on his failed Section 1983 claim and be entitled to fees under Section 1988. App., *infra*, 12. There is no authority for this expansion of *Maher*; to the contrary, another court has concluded that *Maher* does not warrant a fee award where the plaintiff has lost his Section 1983 claim in the lower court, and the appellate court declines to reach the claim. *Amer. Auto. Mfrs. Ass'n v. Cahill*, 53 F. Supp. 2d 174, 179-181 (N.D.N.Y. 1999).

In effect, the Ninth Circuit's new rule creates an assumption for fee purposes that the lower court that decided the Section 1983 claim was in error and should be reversed. *Maher*, however, did not establish a test for implicitly reversing lower court decisions. Indeed, the Ninth Circuit's unfounded implicit reversal rule cannot be reconciled with its own recognition that its decisions on the insurers' due process and Commerce Clause claims continue to have precedential value.[4]

The Ninth Circuit's new rule will create significant mischief in many other cases. By emasculating the "prevailing party" standard for the award of fees, the Ninth Circuit's decision will invite and encourage plaintiffs to

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[4] The concurring opinion expressly acknowledged that the Ninth Circuit's Commerce Clause and due process decisions continue to have precedential effect (App., *infra*, 19 n.1), and the majority opinion implied as much. App., *infra*, 15.

attach meritless Section 1983 claims to routine non-fee bearing claims (*e.g.*, tort claims), hoping that such claims can meet the minimal substantiality test (*i.e.*, non-frivolousness) necessary for a fee award even if the plaintiff loses those claims.[6] If an appellate court declines to address those failed claims, but the plaintiff prevails on his state law claim, fees will be awarded pursuant to *Gerling III*.

The Ninth Circuit's rule will also have a chilling effect on a defendant's decision whether to appeal in cases raising state law and Section 1983 claims. Where a defendant has lost on the state law claim but defeated the Section 1983 claim in the lower court, the defendant may be reluctant to appeal the adverse state law decision for fear that the plaintiff will cross-appeal on the Section 1983 claim, the appellate court will reach only the state law claim, but fees will nevertheless be awarded based on the Section 1983 claim that the plaintiff lost and the appellate court never reached.

Neither the language of Section 1988, the legislative history of that section, the decisions of this Court or others, nor the public policy underlying the award of fees to Section 1983 claimants supports the Ninth Circuit's decision. The insurers had their day in court and were not unfairly deprived of the opportunity to vindicate their Section 1983 rights. Congress neither said nor intended that a plaintiff is entitled to a second (or third) determination on the merits of his Section 1983 claim for purposes of a fee

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[6] The "absence of frivolousness" is "scant protection" for those who are innocent of any civil rights violations. *Buckhannon*, 532 U.S. at 620 n.4 (Scalia, J., concurring).

award. The Ninth Circuit misconstrued *Maher*, and certiorari should be granted to clarify the boundaries of a Section 1988 fee award. Cf. *Elder v. Holloway*, 510 U.S. 510, 515 and n.3 (1994) (granting certiorari and reversing the circuit court's announcement of a new rule of qualified immunity that misconstrued this Court's precedent and that "could have a number of untoward effects").

2. The Ninth Circuit's decision also impermissibly intrudes on this Court's discretionary review process by according fee significance to this Court's grant of certiorari. Under *Gerling III*, this Court's grant of certiorari on a Section 1983 claim that the petitioner lost in the court of appeals in effect reverses that adverse ruling for purposes of a fee award. According to the Ninth Circuit, so long as this Court rules in favor of the petitioner on a non-fee bearing claim and leaves the petitioner's failed Section 1983 claim "unaddressed," the plaintiff is assumed to have prevailed in this Court on that Section 1983 claim for purposes of awarding fees under *Maher*. App., *infra*, 15 and 17.

That result misapprehends and interferes with this Court's limited and discretionary review through certiorari. That discretionary review means, among other things, that this Court is not bound to decide issues that it agrees to hear. The Ninth Circuit's decision, however, burdens this Court's discretion by attaching fee significance to the decision to grant certiorari. In this case, millions of dollars in fees could be awarded to the insurers, who as a matter of law did not vindicate any Section 1983 rights, simply because this Court granted certiorari on their failed due process and Commerce Clause claims and then took no further action with respect to those claims. That result is contrary to well-settled precedent that

affords no weight or legal significance to the grant of certiorari.

Moreover, this Court's exercise of its discretionary review power, by granting certiorari on a Section 1983 claim and then not deciding it, does not implicate *Maher* because it does not unfairly deprive a petitioner of an opportunity to be heard on that claim. Certiorari jurisdiction is used to secure uniformity of decisions or to resolve important questions of public interest. It is not available simply to give a litigant another hearing on the merits. Thus, the policy reasons underlying *Maher* do not apply to this Court's certiorari jurisdiction.

If *Maher* applies, then this Court would (or should) now take into account the potential fee implications of any decision to grant certiorari and any subsequent decision not to address an issue for which it has granted certiorari. There is no authority for the Ninth Circuit's expansion of *Maher* to these circumstances or its attendant intrusion into this Court's discretionary review process.

3. The HVIRA was preempted because it conflicted with the federal government's expression of foreign policy on Holocaust-related claims. That expression of foreign policy did not create individual rights in the insurers that are enforceable under Section 1983. The fact that the insurers incidentally benefited from that foreign policy or had an interest in it is insufficient to create Section 1983 rights. Accordingly, preemption of the HVIRA on foreign affairs grounds does not provide any basis for an award of attorneys' fees pursuant to Section 1988.

ARGUMENT

I. THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S DECISION ERRONEOUSLY EXTENDED *MAHER* TO THIS CASE IN WHICH THE SECTION 1983 CLAIMS WERE DECIDED ADVERSELY TO THE INSURERS

Section 1988 permits a court, in its discretion, to award reasonable attorneys' fees to a party who prevails on his Section 1983 claim (*i.e.*, who prevails on his claim under Section 1983 that he was deprived of a right, privilege or immunity secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States). Prevailing on the "federal civil rights" claim is an "essential predicate" for an award of Section 1988 fees. *Operation Rescue*, 37 F.3d at 653. When a plaintiff is not entitled to relief under Section 1983, "[i]t follows that . . . no attorney's fees can be awarded under § 1988." *Truck Council*, 515 U.S. at 592. The Ninth Circuit ignored this essential predicate in deciding *Gerling III*.[6]

There are occasions where it may be appropriate to infer that a plaintiff who never obtains a decision on his Section 1983 claim nevertheless should be considered the "prevailing party" on that claim. For example, a plaintiff asserting a Section 1983 claim may favorably resolve that

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[6] The Ninth Circuit's assertion that its decision is "entirely consistent" with the *Truck Council* holding (App., *infra*, 13 n.1) is puzzling. This Court held in *Truck Council* that Section 1988 fees are not permitted where the plaintiff obtains relief under state law but is not entitled to Section 1983 relief. 515 U.S. at 592. The Ninth Circuit, on the other hand, has held in *Gerling III* that a plaintiff may recover fees even though all of his Section 1983 claims have been adjudicated against him and, as such, he is not entitled to Section 1983 relief. The Ninth Circuit's decision simply cannot be squared with this Court's holding in *Truck Council*, and the holdings in numerous other cases, that a plaintiff must prevail on a Section 1983 claim in order to receive Section 1988 fees.

claim through a consent decree without ever litigating that claim. Under those circumstances, Congress apparently intended to assume that the plaintiff was a "prevailing party" on his Section 1983 claim. *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 129, 132.

Similarly, where a plaintiff joins a fee-bearing Section 1983 claim with a non-fee bearing statutory claim, the courts for prudential reasons are directed to resolve the case solely on the non-constitutional ground if possible. *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 132 and n.15. If the plaintiff wins his non-fee bearing claim, but is precluded from having a substantial, factually-related Section 1983 claim decided, Congress also thought that fees under Section 1988 might be awarded. *Id.* Under those circumstances, a court is permitted "to assume that the plaintiff has prevailed on his fee-generating claim." *Smith v. Robinson*, 468 U.S. 992, 1007 (1984).

That assumption, however, is not justified where the plaintiff has lost on his Section 1983 claim in the last court to rule on that claim. Such an assumption is inconsistent with the language of Section 1988 and the policy reasons that motivated Congress and this Court to allow fees for certain undecided Section 1983 claims. Indeed, applying the assumption where the plaintiff in fact litigated and lost his Section 1983 claim in the lower court effectively creates a new assumption for fee purposes that the lower court's Section 1983 decision was in error and should be reversed. Neither *Maher* nor the language or legislative history of Section 1988 supports such a radical assumption.

To the contrary, numerous courts have acknowledged that a plaintiff who loses on even a "substantial" Section 1983 claim that is factually related to a successful non-fee

bearing claim is not entitled to fees. Many of these courts have recognized that *Maher* was intended to address the very different situation where a plaintiff has not been able to obtain adjudication of his Section 1983 claim because of the prudential rule directing courts to avoid constitutional questions if the case can be decided on other grounds. At least one court has held, on facts similar to this case, that a plaintiff who loses a Section 1983 claim in the lower court is not entitled to fees on the basis of that claim where, as here, the reviewing court declines to address that claim on appeal.

In *American Automobile Manufacturers Ass'n v. Cahill*, 53 F. Supp. 2d at 174, plaintiffs sued to enjoin a state regulation mandating the sale of a certain clean air vehicle. Plaintiffs challenged the regulation on grounds that it was preempted by the federal Clean Air Act and violated the Due Process and Commerce Clauses. *Id.* at 177-178. Defendants successfully moved to dismiss all plaintiffs' claims, and plaintiffs appealed. *Id.* at 178-179. On appeal, the Second Circuit reversed, holding that the state regulation was preempted by the federal Clean Air Act. *Id.* at 179. Because the preemption decision resolved the lawsuit, the Second Circuit did not address on appeal the due process and Commerce Clause questions. *Id.* at 179.

One of the plaintiffs sought attorneys' fees pursuant to Section 1988. Relying on *Maher*, it argued that fees were recoverable because its constitutional claims were substantial, were undecided by the appellate court, and arose out of the same nucleus of facts as the successful preemption claim. *Id.* at 179-180. The court rejected this argument, holding that plaintiff's loss on its constitutional claims

barred the recovery of fees even though those claims were unaddressed by the court of appeals. *Id.* at 180-181.

The court contrasted the situation contemplated in *Maher* – an undecided federal constitutional claim – with the case before it where the plaintiff had litigated and lost those claims in the district court. *Id.* at 180. Those claims remained "decided" against the plaintiff, notwithstanding the appellate court's failure to address them. *Id.* "[T]o assume otherwise based on plaintiff's success in another claim," the court held, "is to turn a blind eye to the actual status of the case." *Id.*[7]

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals in *Luria Bros. & Co. v. Allen*, 672 F.2d 347 (3d Cir. 1982), correctly framed the issue as follows:

> Thus, the question reduces itself to one of statutory construction: if, as a result of an adjudication, one is the losing and not the prevailing party on a § 1983 claim, may he be entitled nevertheless to attorney's fees on the strength of his success on a related state law claim?

Id. at 357. The court answered the question "no," holding that Section 1988 "plainly limits fee awards to 'the prevailing party'" in an action to enforce Section 1983, and "[t]he losing party is not the prevailing party; what is black cannot be called white." *Id.* Nor, according to the court, was there any legislative intent by Congress "to treat a

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[7] Plaintiff was found to be entitled to fees on its alternative argument that the preemptive Clean Air Act conferred Section 1983 rights under the test articulated in *Blessing v. Freestone*, 520 U.S. 329 (1997). *Cahill*, 53 F. Supp. 2d at 182-186. Here, in contrast, plaintiffs' preemption claim based on the foreign affairs power did not implicate Section 1983. See Section IV below.

losing party in a § 1983 action as a 'prevailing party' simply because he prevails on a related state claim." *Id.*

The court in *Luria* contrasted the situation before it, where the plaintiff had adjudicated and lost his Section 1983 claim, with the situation where a court declines to resolve the fee bearing claim because a non-constitutional claim is dispositive. 672 F.2d at 357. Other circuit courts have made the same distinction, rejecting a fee award where the plaintiff loses his fee bearing claim, even if that claim is substantial and even if the plaintiff has obtained relief pursuant to his state law claim.

In *Haywood v. Ball*, 634 F.2d 740, 742-743 (4th Cir. 1980), for example, a plaintiff who had lost on his "substantial" constitutional claim, but had recovered both compensatory and punitive damages on his state law claim, was not entitled to Section 1988 attorneys' fees. See also *Bonner v. Guccione*, 178 F.3d 581, 595 (2d Cir. 1999) (*Maher* exception permitting fees where constitutional issue is avoided for prudential reasons could not "possibly be implicated in a case in which the federal claim . . . has been actually decided"); *Reel v. Arkansas Dep't of Correction*, 672 F.2d 693, 697-698 (8th Cir. 1982); *Raley v. Fraser*, 747 F.2d 287, 290-292 (5th Cir. 1984).

In *Mateyko v. Felix*, 924 F.2d 824 (9th Cir. 1991), *cert. denied*, 502 U.S. 814 (1991), the Ninth Circuit also recognized the limited scope of *Maher*. Discussing the House Report that accompanied Section 1988, the court noted Congress' concern about depriving a plaintiff of fees where he prevails on a pendent state law claim, but does not obtain an adjudication of the constitutional claim because of the prudential rule discouraging resolution of such claims. *Id.* at 828. "In such a case," the court said, "the

denial of fees would be unfair." *Id.* But where the district court "did not avoid reaching the constitutional issue because the pendent claim was dispositive" and instead held that plaintiff "had no constitutional claim," fees should be denied. *Id.* at 829.

These cases make clear that, contrary to the Ninth Circuit's decision in this case, the proper inquiry is not simply the end result of the litigation without regard to whether plaintiff has litigated and lost his Section 1983 claim. App., *infra*, 15. The determinant of a fee award is not, as the Ninth Circuit concluded, whether the plaintiff obtained his desired relief. *Id.* Instead, the focus must be on whether the plaintiff has prevailed, or can be assumed to have prevailed, on his Section 1983 claim.

In reaching its conclusion, the Ninth Circuit confused the gatekeeper issue of whether the insurers earned an entitlement to Section 1988 fees by prevailing (or, under *Maher*, by being assumed to have prevailed) on a Section 1983 claim, with the different issue of what fees a Section 1983 plaintiff may recover once he has established his right to Section 1988 fees. *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424 (1983), on which the Ninth Circuit relied in its discussion of the importance of the "end result of the litigation" and the need to avoid "piecemeal examination" of the litigation (App., *infra*, 14-15), involved a plaintiff who had prevailed on his Section 1983 claim. The issue before the Court was whether that plaintiff could then recover fees for work spent on contentions in the case on which the plaintiff had not succeeded. Whatever the merit of permitting the recovery of such fees after the plaintiff has established his right to an award of fees, that right must first be established. It was not here.

This Court has recognized that merely obtaining the relief sought is not, by itself, sufficient to entitle a plaintiff to Section 1988 fees. *Buckhannon*, 532 U.S. at 600 (rejecting "catalyst" theory as basis for awarding fees); *Truck Council*, 515 U.S. at 592 (where relief available under state law but not pursuant to Section 1983, "[i]t follows that . . . no attorney's fees can be awarded under § 1988"). Cf. *Bray v. Alexandria Women's Health Clinic*, 506 U.S. 263, 285 (1993) ("Because respondents were not entitled to relief under § 1985(3), they were also not entitled to attorney's fees and costs under 42 U.S.C. § 1988.").

Where a plaintiff has lost his Section 1983 claim in the last court to decide the merits of that claim, he is *not* the prevailing party on that claim and did *not* vindicate any Section 1983 rights, privileges or immunities. The failure of a higher court to decide that claim does not mean, and should not mean, that the plaintiff is now assumed to have prevailed on his Section 1983 claim. To so hold would mean, in effect, that the lower court's decision on the merits of that claim was wrong and was being reversed.

That outcome is fundamentally at odds with the Ninth Circuit's own recognition that its decisions on the insurers' Commerce Clause and due process claims in *Gerling I* and *II* continue to have precedential value. The concurring opinion expressly acknowledged that the Ninth Circuit's Commerce Clause and due process decisions continue to have precedential effect (App., *infra*, 19 n.1), and the Ninth Circuit majority implied the same thing. App., *infra*, 15. Those decisions concluded that the insurers had not been deprived of any right, privilege or immunity granted by Section 1983. Those decisions, according to the Ninth Circuit, are still correct. Yet, for fee purposes, the Ninth Circuit ignored its decisions and the insurers' loss on their Section 1983 claims.

Congress and this Court in *Maher* were concerned about a plaintiff who was deprived of his day in court on his Section 1983 claim, not a plaintiff who had his day in court and lost. Neither the language of Section 1988, requiring that a plaintiff be the "prevailing party" on his Section 1983 claim, the legislative history of Section 1988, nor the public policy underlying *Maher* supports an award of fees where the plaintiff has lost that claim on the merits.[8]

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[8] None of the cases relied on by the insurers supports the *Gerling III* decision. In *Espino v. Besteiro*, 708 F.2d 1002 (5th Cir. 1983), the district court had granted preliminary injunctive relief based on a non-fee bearing statute, choosing to avoid plaintiff's constitutional claims for prudential reasons. *Id.* at 1004, 1007. The parties thereafter settled by agreeing to the injunctive relief sought by the plaintiff. *Id.* at 1004. Because of this disposition, no court ever reached the merits of plaintiff's fee-bearing constitutional claims. *Espino* is therefore an ordinary application of *Maher*.

In *Aubin v. Fudala*, 782 F.2d 287, 290-291 (1st Cir. 1986), the plaintiffs had prevailed on their civil rights claims. In *Williams v. Thomas*, 692 F.2d 1032 (5th Cir. 1982), the court applied *Maher* when it declined to rule on an appeal from a Section 1983 claim on which the plaintiff had technically prevailed in the lower court, and instead affirmed the plaintiff's win on the state law claim and directed an award of fees.

Nor does *Carreras v. City of Anaheim*, 768 F.2d 1039, 1050 (9th Cir. 1985), support the *Gerling III* decision. As the Ninth Circuit noted in *Gerling III* (App., *infra*, 11), the plaintiffs in *Carreras* had prevailed in part on their federal constitutional claim in the lower court. Moreover, the court of appeals in *Carreras* ruled that the district court should not have reached that claim in any event because state law disposed of the case in the plaintiffs' favor. 768 F.2d at 1042-1043. As such, the district court's decision on the federal constitutional question was "unnecessary" (*id.* at 1043), and the court effectively treated the claim as never decided for fee purposes, awarding fees based on a *Maher* analysis.

II. THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S DECISION CONFLICTS WITH DECISIONS OF THIS COURT AND OTHER COURTS

As explained in Section I above, the Ninth Circuit's decision to award attorneys' fees to plaintiffs that litigated and lost all their fee-generating claims on the merits is at serious odds with decisions of this Court and numerous circuits. This Court and others have held that a plaintiff must prevail (or be assumed to have prevailed) on a Section 1983 claim to be entitled to fees, that merely achieving the relief sought in the litigation is not enough to entitle a plaintiff to Section 1988 fees, and that a loss on the Section 1983 claim precludes a fee award. See *Truck Council*, 515 U.S. at 592; cf. *Buckhannon*, 532 U.S. at 600; *Bray*, 506 U.S. at 285; *Operation Rescue*, 37 F.3d at 653-654. The Ninth Circuit disregarded each of these core principles in deciding *Gerling III*.

These conflicts in principle warrant the grant of certiorari here. See *United States v. Nat'l Bank of Commerce*, 472 U.S. 713, 719 (1985) (granting certiorari where the court of appeals' opinion appeared "to conflict, directly or in principle, with decisions of other Courts of Appeals"); *Ivan Allen Co. v. United States*, 422 U.S. 617, 623-624 (1975) (certiorari granted where decision conflicted in principle with another lower court decision and raised an important issue). See also Robert L. Stern, et al., *Supreme Court Practice* 225, 226 (8th ed. 2002) ("A conflict is sometimes asserted on the basis of differences between the general principles or the reasoning involved in the two decisions . . . [S]uch conflicts may move the court to grant certiorari, especially if the case is otherwise important.").

A conflict in principle justifies the grant of certiorari even if no other appellate court has decided the precise issue presented. *Begier v. IRS*, 496 U.S. 53, 57 n.2 (1990); *Supreme Court Practice* at 232.

The Ninth Circuit's decision is also flatly in conflict with at least one district court decision. *Cahill*, 53 F. Supp. 2d at 179-181. That conflict also supports the grant of certiorari here. See *Massachusetts v. United States*, 435 U.S. 444, 453 (1978) (certiorari granted on a conflict between a court of appeals decision and a single judge district court ruling); *Supreme Court Practice* at 238 (conflict between district and circuit court is a factor reinforcing some other basis of review, such as the importance of the question or "the confusing and differing judicial responses to that question").

The availability of fee awards in civil rights cases should not depend on where the case is brought. Plaintiffs who litigate and lose their civil rights claims in any court outside the Ninth Circuit may not recover fees. Plaintiffs who lose such claims in a Ninth Circuit court, on the other hand, may recover fees under *Gerling III*. That conflict should be resolved by this Court.

III. THIS COURT'S GRANT OF CERTIORARI ON THE INSURERS' FAILED SECTION 1983 CLAIMS AND ITS SUBSEQUENT DECISION NOT TO ADDRESS THOSE CLAIMS DID NOT CREATE AN ASSUMPTION FOR PURPOSES OF AWARDING FEES THAT THE INSURERS PREVAILED ON THOSE CLAIMS

This Court granted certiorari on plaintiffs' Commerce Clause and due process claims but did not address those

claims in its decision. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 413 n.7. The Ninth Circuit panel majority in this case asserted that the Commissioner was unnecessarily concerned about whether its decision meant that the "mere grant of certiorari" would become a "benchmark for granting fees." App., *infra*, 15, n.2. The grant of certiorari, the panel majority said, "does not factor into the prevailing party calculation," since it is "only when the Supreme Court (or the court of highest authority to hear a case) rules in favor of a plaintiff and grants him the relief he sought will that plaintiff be considered prevailing under § 1988." *Id.*

That statement, as Judge Graber recognized in her concurrence (App., *infra*, 18-19), is simply not correct. It is only because this Court granted certiorari on the Commerce Clause and due process claims and then declined to decide those claims that the Ninth Circuit thought it could bring this case within *Maher* and award fees to the insurers. As Judge Graber inferred, and as the insurers conceded in their briefing (App., *infra*, 18, 30-31), had this Court not granted certiorari on those claims, the insurers would not be entitled to attorneys' fees even with their success on the foreign affairs claim.[9] The Ninth Circuit's decision misapprehends the purpose of this Court's certiorari jurisdiction and improperly burdens it.

First, this Court's review of an issue presented in a petition for certiorari is entirely discretionary, and no litigant has a right to have such an issue decided by this

[9] The panel majority's statement also confuses obtaining relief on *some* claim in the case with the "essential predicate" that a plaintiff must prevail, or be assumed to have prevailed, on its Section 1983 claim in order to justify Section 1988 fees. See discussion in Section I above.

Court, even if certiorari is granted. Supreme Court Rule 10; *Burrell v. McCray*, 426 U.S. 471, 472 (1976) (Stevens, J., concurring) (discussing the Court's "broad control of its discretionary docket"). The purpose of the Court's certiorari jurisdiction is to secure uniformity of decisions or to resolve important questions of public interest. *Magnum Import Co. v. Coty*, 262 U.S. 159, 163 (1923). This Court does not grant certiorari "merely to give the defeated party in the Circuit Court of Appeals another hearing." *Id.* Under these circumstances, this Court's decision not to address the insurers' Commerce Clause and due process claims did not unfairly deprive the insurers of an opportunity to be heard on those claims, and *Maher* is irrelevant.

Second, this Court's grant of certiorari carried no implication of the Court's view of the merits of the insurers' Section 1983 claims. See *Tax Analysts v. United States Dep't of Justice*, 965 F.2d 1092, 1097 (D.C. Cir. 1992); *Jackson v. Maine*, 300 F. Supp. 2d 197, 199 (D. Me. 2004) (no significance attaches to Supreme Court grant or denial of certiorari). Nor is it appropriate to infer that this Court overruled the Ninth Circuit's rulings on the merits of those issues when it decided not to address them. See *Texas v. Cobb*, 532 U.S. 162, 169 (2001) ("Constitutional rights are not defined by inferences from opinions which did not address the question at issue."). This Court did not vacate the Ninth Circuit's rulings on the Commerce Clause and due process claims, and, as the Ninth Circuit recognized (App., *infra*, 15 and 19 n.1), the insurers' losses on those claims remained in place after this Court's disposition of the case. See *Central Pines Land Co. v. United States*, 274 F.3d 881, 893-894 and n.57 (5th Cir. 2001); 18 *Moore's Federal Practice* § 134.05[5] (3d ed. 2005).

If *Maher* is extended to encompass failed Section 1983 claims that this Court leaves "unaddressed," then this Court, which is not bound to decide any claim that it agrees to hear, will have created a fee-generating event by the grant of certiorari. Neither Supreme Court Rule 10 nor any case of which the Commissioner is aware refers to the potential fee bearing character of an issue as an appropriate factor for this Court to consider in deciding whether to grant certiorari. Yet, the attachment of fee significance to that grant, evident here, would create just such a factor.

IV. FOREIGN AFFAIRS PREEMPTION DOES NOT CREATE INDIVIDUAL SECTION 1983 RIGHTS

The district court held that this Court's foreign affairs preemption ruling in *Garamendi* was not one that enforced any right or immunity secured to the insurers by the Constitution or federal law. App., *infra*, 24-26. Judge Graber's concurring opinion in *Gerling III* expressly recognized that such foreign affairs preemption does not create individual Section 1983 rights (App., *infra*, 18), and the Ninth Circuit panel majority in that decision assumed, but did not decide, the same thing. App., *infra*, 9 and 17. The district court and Judge Graber were correct.

A. The Supremacy Clause Is Not A Source Of Individual Section 1983 Rights

Section 1983 provides private plaintiffs a means to enforce "rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws." The statute "is not itself a source of substantive rights, but rather a method for vindicating federal rights elsewhere conferred by those parts of the

United States Constitution and federal statutes that it describes." *Baker v. McCollan*, 443 U.S. 137, 145 n.3 (1979); see also *Chapman v. Houston Welfare Rights Org.*, 441 U.S. 600, 617 (1979) ("[O]ne cannot go into court and claim a 'violation of § 1983' – for § 1983 by itself does not protect anyone against anything.").

Similarly, the Supremacy Clause itself does not create individual federal rights. *Golden State Transit Corp. v. City of Los Angeles*, 493 U.S. 103, 107-108 (1989) ("'[The Supremacy] [C]lause is not a source of any federal rights'; it 'secures federal rights by according them priority whenever they come in conflict with state law.'") (quoting *Chapman*, 441 U.S. at 613). Thus, a Supremacy Clause claim "is enforceable under § 1983 only when the [preemptive federal law] creates 'rights, privileges or immunities' in the particular plaintiff." *Golden State*, 493 U.S. at 108 n.4.[10]

To provide a basis for a Section 1983 action, the preemptive federal law must "unambiguously confer" an individually enforceable right. *Gonzaga Univ. v. Doe*, 536 U.S. 273, 283 (2002) ("[I]t is only violations of *rights*, not *laws*, which give rise to § 1983 actions. . . . [O]ur cases [do not] permit anything short of an unambiguously conferred right to support a cause of action brought under § 1983.") (emphasis in original). In determining whether a violation of a federal right exists for purposes of Section 1983, this Court relies on its "implied right of action" jurisprudence and asks whether the preemptive federal provision was

[10] This distinguishes the Supremacy Clause from the Commerce Clause, which this Court has found does secure an individual "right to engage in interstate trade free from restrictive state regulation." *Dennis v. Higgins*, 498 U.S. 439, 448 (1991).

intended to confer individual rights on a particular class of persons. *Id.* at 283, 285, 286.

B. The Federal Foreign Policy For Resolving Holocaust Claims Reflected In Executive Agreements With Other Nations Did Not Unambiguously Confer Section 1983 Rights On The Insurers

In *Garamendi*, this Court held that the HVIRA was preempted because it conflicted with the federal government's exercise of its foreign policy favoring consensual resolution of Holocaust-era insurance claims. See *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 427 ("The question relevant to preemption in this case is conflict, and the evidence here is more than sufficient to demonstrate that the [HVIRA] stands in the way of the President's diplomatic objectives.") (internal quotation marks and alteration omitted). This foreign policy was reflected in executive agreements between the United States and Germany, Austria, and France, and in the government's support for the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC). *Id.* at 403, 413.

This expression of foreign policy did not create individual rights. As this Court recognized, the doctrine of foreign affairs preemption invalidates state laws that conflict with the President's authority to conduct the Nation's foreign affairs. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 413-414. Thus, this Court held that the HVIRA was unconstitutional, not because it violated any person's rights, but rather because "state law must give way where, as here, there is evidence of clear conflict between the policies adopted" by the federal Executive Branch and California over matters of international interest thought to arise out

of World War II. *Id.* at 421. The capacity of the President to conduct foreign affairs is patently a matter of collective, rather than individual, concern, and the Executive's exercise of its foreign affairs power here was not intended to confer any rights on the insurers.

Neither the executive agreements nor the federal policy they reflect unambiguously conferred any rights on the insurers that are enforceable under Section 1983. Instead, their purpose was to provide Holocaust victims with "some measure of compensation" through "voluntary, non-adversarial mechanisms." App., *infra*, 34-35, 36. While this approach might also further the insurers' interest in avoiding litigation or regulatory action, the federal government took this course expressly because it "serves the interests of Holocaust victims and their families" and also "serves important interests of the Nation in cooperative relations with its European allies." App., *infra*, 37. Presumably, under this Court's analysis, if the President had decided that the HVIRA would better assist survivors in resolving their claims, the statute would not have been preempted, even though it "harmed" the insurers, because the statute would no longer conflict with the President's policy.

At best, the insurers are "incidental" beneficiaries of the executive agreements – a status insufficient to permit suit under Section 1983 because "it is *rights*, not the broader or vaguer 'benefits' or 'interests,' that may be enforced under the authority of that section." *Gonzaga*, 536 U.S. at 283 (emphasis in original); see also *Golden State*, 493 U.S. at 109 (where federal law benefits a particular party "only as an incident of the federal scheme of regulations," a Section 1983 remedy is not available). "The question is not simply who would benefit from the [federal

law], but whether [the federal government] intended to confer federal rights upon those beneficiaries." *Gonzaga*, 536 U.S. at 286.[11]

In sum, the HVIRA was not preempted because it interfered with any insurer right, but because it conflicted with the President's ability to conduct foreign policy. This conflict does not even remotely suggest the grant of some enforceable Section 1983 right to the insurers, let alone an unambiguous grant of such right. Accordingly, preemption of the HVIRA on these grounds does not provide any basis for a Section 1983 claim and an award of attorneys' fees pursuant to Section 1988.

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[11] Nor does the plain language of these executive agreements reflect any intent by the federal government to confer any rights on the insurers. As the government recognized in an *amicus* brief filed in the Ninth Circuit, the insurers were not promised "legal peace." App., *infra*, 32-33.

CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari should be granted.

Respectfully submitted,

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FOR PUBLICATION

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORPORATION OF AMERICA, US Branch; GERLING GLOBAL LIFE REINSURANCE COMPANY; GERLING GLOBAL LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY; GERLING AMERICA INSURANCE COMPANY; CONSTITUTION INSURANCE COMPANY; REVIOS REINSURANCE CANADA, LTD.; REVIOS REINSURANCE U.S., INC.; ASSICURAZIONI GENERALI S.P.A.; AMERICAN INSURANCE ASSOCIATION; AMERICAN RE-INSURANCE COMPANY,

Plaintiffs-Appellants,

and

WINTERTHUR INTERNATIONAL AMERICA INSURANCE COMPANY; WINTERTHUR INTERNATIONAL AMERICA UNDERWRITERS INSURANCE COMPANY; GENERAL CASUALTY COMPANY OF WISCONSIN; REGENT INSURANCE COMPANY; REPUBLIC INSURANCE COMPANY; SOUTHERN INSURANCE COMPANY; UNIGARD INDEMNITY COMPANY; UNIGARD INSURANCE COMPANY; BLUE RIDGE INSURANCE CO.,

Plaintiffs,

v.

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as the Insurance Commissioner of the State of California,

Defendant-Appellee.

No. 04-15332
D.C. No.
CV-00-00506-WBS

AMERICAN INSURANCE ASSOCIATION; AMERICAN RE-INSURANCE COMPANY,

Plaintiffs-Appellants,

v.

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as the Insurance Commissioner of the State of California,

Defendant-Appellee.

No. 04-15455
D.C. No.
CV-00-00613-
WBS/JFM
ORDER AND
AMENDED
OPINION

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Eastern District of California
William B. Shubb, Chief Judge, Presiding

Argued and Submitted
December 13, 2004 – Pasadena, California

Filed March 10, 2005
Amended June 3, 2005

Before: Alfred T. Goodwin, Susan P. Graber,
and Richard A. Paez, Circuit Judges.

Opinion by Judge Goodwin;
Concurrence by Judge Graber

COUNSEL

Charles A. Rothfeld, Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw, LLP, Washington, D.C., for the plaintiffs-appellants.

Frank Kaplan, Alschuler Grossman Stein & Kahan, LLP, Santa Monica, California, for the defendant-appellee.

ORDER

The opinion filed March 10, 2005, slip op. 3137 and appearing at 400 F.3d 803 (9th Cir. 2005), is amended as follows:

400 F.3d at 809 (slip op. at 3150, 10th line from the bottom of the page): Following the citation at the end of the sentence, "We conclude that the unaddressed due process and Commerce Clause claims . . . pass the 'substantiality' test and therefore support an award of fees to the plaintiffs," add the following footnote and renumber the subsequent footnotes accordingly:

> FN 1: The Commissioner and Amici argue that this result is contrary to *National Private Truck Council, Inc. v. Oklahoma Tax Commission*, 515 U.S. 582, 592 (1995). *Truck Council* held that where an adequate state law remedy exists in a state tax case, federal courts are not permitted to award declaratory or injunctive § 1983 relief. *Id.* at 589. The Court affirmed the Oklahoma Supreme Court's rejection of the plaintiff's § 1983 claims and declined to award § 1988 attorney's fees because § 1983 relief could not be awarded. *Id.* at 592. The *Truck Council* holding is entirely consistent with our decision. If a plaintiff does not have a substantial, properly cognizable § 1983 claim, then § 1988 attorney's fees may not be awarded. In addition, if the Supreme Court in this case had expressly affirmed *Gerling II*'s rejection of plaintiff's due process and Commerce Clause claims, then plaintiffs would not be entitled to § 1988 fees.

With the opinion thus amended, the panel has voted unanimously to deny the petition for rehearing. Judges Graber and Paez have voted to deny the petition for rehearing en banc, and Judge Goodwin recommended denial.

The full court has been advised of the petition for rehearing en banc and no active judge has requested a vote on whether to rehear the matter en banc. Fed. R. App. P. 35.

The petition for rehearing is DENIED and the petition for rehearing en banc is DENIED.

No subsequent petitions for rehearing or petitions for rehearing en banc may be filed.

GOODWIN, Senior Circuit Judge:

OPINION

This case returns to our calendar for the fourth time following its journey to the Supreme Court. Plaintiffs, three insurance companies and one insurance trade association, originally brought this action against the California Commissioner of Insurance ("Commissioner") seeking to bar the enforcement of the Holocaust Victim Insurance Relief Act of 1999 ("HVIRA"), Cal. Ins. Code §§ 13800-13807 (1999). That statute requires the disclosure of certain information pertaining to Holocaust-era insurance policies written in Europe. Following the Supreme Court's disposition of the case in their favor, plaintiffs sought attorney's fees in this court. We remanded the

fees question to the district court, which denied the request. The appealable order was appealed.

This appeal presents two principal questions. First, did the district court err when it held that plaintiffs were not prevailing parties within the meaning of 42 U.S.C. § 1988? Second, do the foreign affairs power of the Executive branch and the related executive agreements between the United States, Germany, Austria, and France create private rights within the meaning of 42 U.S.C. § 1983?

We hold that plaintiffs are prevailing parties and are thus entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney's fee. Because we hold that plaintiffs are prevailing parties, we do not reach the question whether executive actions under the foreign affairs power create justiciable private rights. Therefore, under the authority of *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122 (1980), we remand to the district court for a determination of the proper fee.

I. Factual Background and Procedural History

Because the facts of this case have been set forth by this court and by the Supreme Court in detail, *see Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. ("Gerling Global") v. Low*, 240 F.3d 739, 754 (9th Cir. 2001) ("*Gerling I*"); *Gerling Global v. Low*, 296 F.3d 832 (9th Cir. 2002) ("*Gerling II*"); *Am. Ins. Ass'n v. Garamendi*, 539 U.S. 396 (2003), we recount only the basic procedural history here.

Plaintiffs brought this action seeking declaratory and injunctive relief from the enforcement of HVIRA, claiming that the statute violated the Commerce Clause, Due Process Clause, foreign affairs power, and other constitutional provisions. The district court concluded that plaintiffs

"demonstrated a probability of success on the merits that the HVIRA is unconstitutional in violation of the federal foreign affairs power and a violation of the Commerce Clause." *Gerling Global v. Quackenbush*, 2000 WL 777978, *13 (E.D. Cal. June 9, 2000). After finding that the balance of irreparable harm favored the plaintiffs, the district court granted a preliminary injunction and enjoined the enforcement of HVIRA and its implementing regulations. *Id.* at *13-14.

The Commissioner appealed and we reversed, leaving the preliminary injunction in place. We remanded the case to the district court to consider plaintiffs' due process claims. *Gerling I*, 240 F.3d at 754.

On remand, the district court granted plaintiffs' motion for summary judgment and permanently enjoined the Commissioner from enforcing HVIRA, holding that "[b]y mandating license suspension for non-performance of what may be impossible tasks without allowing for a meaningful hearing, HVIRA deprives plaintiffs of a protected property interest without affording them due process of law." *Gerling Global v. Low*, 186 F. Supp. 2d 1099, 1113 (E.D. Cal. 2001).

The Commissioner again appealed the district court decision. During the pendency of that appeal, the plaintiffs filed a motion with the district court seeking attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988. The district court denied the motion, and plaintiffs timely appealed.

In *Gerling II*, we reversed the district court and held that HVIRA did not violate plaintiffs' due process rights, the Commerce Clause, the foreign affairs power, the Bill of Attainder Clause, the Contract Clause, the Equal Protection Clause, or the Fourth Amendment. 296 F.3d 832. We

concluded that plaintiffs were not "prevailing parties" under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 and therefore were not entitled to attorney fees. *Id.* at 851.

The Supreme Court granted certiorari. *Am. Ins. Ass'n v. Low*, 537 U.S. 1100 (2003). The grant of certiorari "encompassed three of the questions addressed [in *Gerling I* and *Gerling II*]: whether HVIRA intrudes on the federal foreign affairs power, violates the self-executing element of the Foreign Commerce Clause, or exceeds the State's 'legislative jurisdiction.'" *Am. Ins. Ass'n*, 539 U.S. at 413 n.7. The Court reversed this court's judgment, holding that HVIRA was pre-empted by Executive Branch authority over foreign policy. *Id.* at 420. The Court did not address the Commerce Clause and Due Process Clause issues. *Id.* at 413 n.7 ("Because we hold that HVIRA is preempted under the foreign affairs doctrine, we have no reason to address the other questions.").

Following the Court's decision, plaintiffs sought attorney's fees and moved this court for supplemental briefing and oral argument. We transferred the fee issue to the district court for consideration on a factual record. *Gerling Global v. Low*, 339 F.3d 1078 (9th Cir. 2003) ("*Gerling III*").

The district court declined to award fees because it concluded that the foreign affairs power did not implicate "a right, privilege, or immunity secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States" and therefore could not form the basis of a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claim.

II. The Prevailing Party Determination

The Civil Rights Attorney's Fee Award Act of 1976 provides, in relevant part: "In any action or proceeding to enforce a provision of [42 U.S.C. § 1983], the court, in its discretion, may allow the prevailing party, other than the United States, a reasonable attorney's fee as part of the costs." 42 U.S.C. § 1988(b). 42 U.S.C. § 1983, in turn, protects against the "deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws." The first issue is whether plaintiffs constitute "prevailing parties."

The Supreme Court has summarized the "prevailing party" determination as follows:

> [T]o qualify as a prevailing party, a civil rights plaintiff must obtain at least some relief on the merits of his claim. The plaintiff must obtain an enforceable judgment against the defendant from whom fees are sought, [*Hewitt v. Helms*, 482 U.S. 755, 760, 107 S. Ct. 2672, 96 L.Ed.2d 654 (1987)], or comparable relief through a consent decree or settlement, *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122, 129, 100 S. Ct. 2570, 65 L.Ed.2d 653 (1980). Whatever relief the plaintiff secures must directly benefit him at the time of the judgment or settlement. *See Hewitt*, [482 U.S. at 764] . . . In short, a plaintiff 'prevails' when actual relief on the merits of his claim materially alters the legal relationship between the parties by modifying the defendant's behavior in a way that directly benefits the plaintiff.

Farrar v. Hobby, 506 U.S. 103, 111-12 (1992). We hold that plaintiffs are prevailing parties in this litigation. Plaintiffs not only obtained "some" relief on the merits of their claim, they received all of the relief they sought in their

lawsuit – a permanent injunction enjoined the enforcement of HVIRA. Clearly, the ruling of the Supreme Court modified the Commissioner's behavior by "materially alter[ing] the legal relationship between the parties." *See id.*

The second issue is whether the plaintiffs prevailed under a fee-generating legal "right." The Supreme Court decided for the plaintiffs relying on the implied preemption of HVIRA by the foreign affairs power of the Executive branch. The Commissioner argues that, because the Supreme Court ruled in favor of plaintiffs on a ground not covered by § 1983, the plaintiffs are not § 1988 prevailing parties. We are thus faced with the question whether a court, in an action containing both fee-supporting § 1983 claims and a claim which may not independently support a fee award, may deprive plaintiffs of attorney's fees by grounding its ruling on the non-fee-generating claim. Answering this question in the affirmative would be inconsistent with both Supreme Court and Ninth Circuit precedent.

Beginning with the assumption that the foreign affairs power does not confer rights within the meaning of § 1983, we must determine whether the claims left unaddressed by the Supreme Court, but included in its grant of certiorari – the Commerce Clause and Due Process Clause claims – may support an award of attorney's fees. Due Process Clause and Commerce Clause claims are both properly cognizable, fee-supporting claims under § 1983. *See, e.g., Dennis v. Higgins,* 498 U.S. 439, 446 (1991) (Commerce Clause); *Paul v. Davis,* 424 U.S. 693, 696-97 (1976) (Due Process Clause). Plaintiffs urge us to apply *Maher v. Gagne,* 448 U.S. 122 (1980), and its progeny to conclude that fees are appropriate here because the

unaddressed claims were both substantial and arose from a common nucleus of operative fact with the foreign affairs power claim.

Maher held that an award of fees is appropriate where a "plaintiff prevails on a wholly statutory, non-civil-rights claim pendent to a substantial constitutional claim or in one in which both a statutory and a substantial constitutional claim are settled favorably to the plaintiff without adjudication." *Id.* at 132. The plaintiff in *Maher* advanced claims under the Social Security Act and the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Id.* at 124-25. The parties settled through a consent decree before a final adjudication of any of the claims. *Id.* at 126 & n.8. Noting that "[n]othing in the language of § 1988 conditions the District Court's power to award fees on full litigation of the issues or on a judicial determination that the plaintiff's rights have been violated," and emphasizing the policy supporting a broad reading of the fees statutes, the Court affirmed the award of fees to the plaintiff. *Id.* at 129-30.

Although the matter in *Maher* was settled through a consent decree, the *Maher* holding applies equally to the determination of pendent claims through litigation. *See, e.g., Carreras v. City of Anaheim*, 768 F.2d 1039, 1050 (9th Cir. 1985), *abrogated on other grounds by Los Angeles Alliance for Survival v. City of Los Angeles*, 993 P.2d 334 (Cal. 2000) (awarding fees where plaintiff prevailed, through litigation, on pendent state constitutional law claims).

Carreras provides some guidance here because it demonstrates *Maher*'s applicability in the context of litigation, but it is not the panacea plaintiffs propose. In

that case, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness of Laguna Beach, Inc. (ISKCON) sued the City of Anaheim over the city's prohibition of ISKCON's practice of soliciting donations in the parking areas and walkways surrounding the Anaheim Stadium and the Anaheim Convention Center. 768 F.2d at 1041. The district court, relying on federal constitutional law, held that ISKCON was not entitled to relief as to the stadium area because that area was not a public forum. *Id.* at 1045 & n.10. However, the district court did grant ISKCON relief with respect to the convention center, also relying upon federal law in reaching its conclusion. *Id.* at 1046 & n.15. On appeal, this court did not reach the federal constitutional question but, relying on the California constitution, we reversed the district court's holding on the stadium issue. Despite the fact that we did not explicitly reverse the district court's federal constitutional analysis, *see id.* at 1045 n.10, we relied on *Maher* to award attorney's fees. *Id.* at 1050. We are aware that *Carreras* is distinguishable because ISKCON did prevail on a fee-supporting claim – the convention center claim – at the district court level. Moreover, we reversed the district court's convention center holding on different grounds, rather than avoiding that issue altogether. However, we do not read *Carreras* to impose a limit on our ability to award a fee in this case. Rather, we read *Carreras*'s application of *Maher* to support an award of fees where, as here, the court of highest authority to hear a case avoids resolution of a fee-supporting federal claim.

A. Applicability of Maher

Maher advocated a "substantiality test" for determining whether a pendent claim can support an award of fees:

> In some instances . . . the claim with fees may involve a constitutional question which the courts are reluctant to resolve if the non-constitutional claim is dispositive. [*Hagans v. Lavine*, 415 U.S. 528 (1974)]. In such cases, if the claim for which fees may be awarded meets the 'substantiality' test, *see* [*id.* at 537-38; *United Mine Workers v. Gibbs*, 383 U.S. 715 (1966)], attorney's fees may be allowed even though the court declines to enter judgment for the plaintiff on that claim, so long as the plaintiff prevails on the non-fee claim arising out of a 'common nucleus of operative fact.' [*Gibbs*, 383 U.S. at 725].

Maher, 448 U.S. at 132 n.15 (quoting H.R. Rep. No. 1558, at 4 n.7 (1976)). Under this formulation, we conclude that, for the purpose of qualifying a prevailing party, an unaddressed, fee-supporting claim supports an award of fees if it is both substantial and arises from a common nucleus of operative fact with a dispositive, non-fee-supporting claim addressed by the court. That the substantiality test speaks of situations in which a "non-constitutional claim is dispositive" does not dilute its relevance when a claim, such as the implied preemption claim at issue here, may be termed a "constitutional claim." A court's decision to resolve one constitutional question and to avoid others does not exempt the attorney's fee question from the reasoning of *Maher*.

We turn now to the application of the *Maher* substantiality test to the Due Process Clause and Commerce Clause claims. A claim is constitutionally insubstantial if it is "essentially fictitious . . . wholly insubstantial . . . obviously frivolous . . . [or] obviously without merit." *Hagans*, 415 U.S. at 537-38 (quotations and citations omitted). This panel has twice grappled with the fee-supporting issues in

detail. *See Gerling I*, 240 F.3d at 754; *Gerling II*, 296 F.3d 832. The extent of our previous analysis demonstrates that the Due Process Clause and Commerce Clause claims brought by plaintiffs were not constitutionally insubstantial.

Claims arise from a common nucleus of operative fact where fee-supporting claims are so interrelated with non-fee claims that plaintiffs "would ordinarily be expected to try them all in one judicial proceeding." *Gibbs*, 383 U.S. at 725. The three claims to which the Supreme Court granted certiorari all arose from California's attempted enforcement of HVIRA. Plaintiffs correctly attempted to try all of their issues in one proceeding. We conclude that the unaddressed due process and Commerce Clause claims, which remained in the case until the final disposition by the Supreme Court, pass the "substantiality" test and therefore support an award of fees to plaintiffs. *Cf. Maher*, 448 U.S. at 131 ("Although . . . the trial judge did not find any constitutional violation, the constitutional issues remained in the case until the entire dispute was settled by the entry of a consent decree.").[1]

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[1] The Commissioner and Amici argue that this result is contrary to *National Private Truck Council, Inc. v. Oklahoma Tax Commission*, 515 U.S. 582, 4592 (1995). *Truck Council* held that where an adequate state law remedy exists in a state tax case, federal courts are not permitted to award declaratory or injunctive § 1983 relief. *Id.* at 589. The Court affirmed the Oklahoma Supreme Court's rejection of the plaintiff's § 1983 claims and declined to award § 1988 attorney's fees because § 1983 relief could not be awarded. *Id.* at 592. The *Truck Council* holding is entirely consistent with our decision. If a plaintiff does not have a substantial, properly cognizable § 1983 claim, then § 1988 attorney's fees may not be awarded. In addition, if the Supreme Court in this case had expressly affirmed *Gerling II*'s rejection of plaintiff's

(Continued on following page)

B. Our Previous Holdings

We must note that the fee determination is further complicated by the lengthy procedural history of the case, forcing us to address our previous holdings in *Gerling I* and *Gerling II*. Recognizing the admonition of the Supreme Court that "[a] request for attorney's fees should not result in a second major litigation," *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 437 (1983), we briefly revisit those cases in order to put to rest the Commissioner's contention that plaintiffs cannot be considered "prevailing parties" because we previously rejected their due process and Commerce Clause claims. In *Gerling I*, we held that the district court erroneously concluded that plaintiffs demonstrated a likelihood of success on the Commerce Clause issue. 240 F.3d at 751. We further held, incorrectly, it turned out, that HVIRA did not conflict with the foreign affairs power. *Id.* at 753. In *Gerling II*, we repeated our conclusion that HVIRA did not violate the Commerce Clause or the foreign affairs power, and we determined that HVIRA also did not violate plaintiffs' due process rights. 296 F.3d at 844, 849.

As discussed above, the Supreme Court did not reach either the Commerce Clause or the due process issues. Even aside from plaintiff's contention that our Commerce Clause and due process holdings were impliedly overruled by *American Insurance Ass'n*, 539 U.S. 396, however, we conclude that in exercising its discretion to award attorney's fees, a district court must focus on whether a plaintiff "succeed[s] on any significant issue in litigation which

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due process and Commerce Clause claims, then plaintiffs would not be entitled to § 1988 fees.

achieves some of the benefit the parties sought in bringing the suit." *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 433 (quoting *Nadeau v. Helgemoe*, 581 F.2d 275, 278-79 (1st Cir. 1978)).

The proper inquiry zeros in on the end result of the litigation: A piecemeal examination of the arguments that the court of final authority did or did not reach may be helpful in determining our prior opinions' precedential value, but it is not helpful in determining whether a plaintiff is a "prevailing party" within the meaning of § 1988 at the conclusion of the litigation. *See id.* at 435 ("Litigants in good faith may raise alternative legal grounds for a desired outcome, and the court's rejection of or failure to reach certain grounds is not a sufficient reason for reducing a fee. The result is what matters.").[3] So long as an unaddressed, fee-supporting claim meets the substantiality test set forth above, and the end result of the litigation grants a plaintiff his desired relief, the unaddressed claim may support a fee award regardless of the decision of the court below. Accordingly, we conclude that our holdings in *Gerling I* and *Gerling II* do not preclude the district court from exercising its discretion to award a reasonable attorney's fee under *Maher*.

We are not unaware of our holding in *Mateyko v. Felix*, 924 F.2d 824, 828 (9th Cir. 1991). In that case, the court did not invoke principles of avoidance; rather, "it found

[3] Focusing on the end result of the litigation should answer the Commissioner's concern that the "mere grant of certiorari" will become a benchmark for granting fees. The grant of certiorari does not factor into the prevailing plaintiff calculation – only when the Supreme Court (or the court of highest authority to hear a case) rules in favor of a plaintiff and grants him the relief he sought will that plaintiff be considered prevailing under § 1988.

that [Mateyko] had no constitutional claim at all," and granted a directed verdict on all of the § 1983 claims. *Id.* at 829 (quoting *Reel v. Ark. Dep't of Corr.*, 672 F.2d 693, 698 (8th Cir. 1982)). A jury, reviewing the remaining state law claims, found Mateyko was 96% contributorily negligent for his state negligent infliction of emotional distress claim, and entered a judgment in his favor for 4% of his damages. *Id.* at 825. We rejected Mateyko's claim that this small victory made him a prevailing plaintiff. *Id.* at 828-29. This result is consistent with our holding above because, at the conclusion of litigation and after we affirmed the directed verdict, no fee-supporting claims remained in the case – Mateyko could not invoke *Maher* because there *was no* unaddressed fee-supporting claim which could pass *Maher*'s substantiality test. In such a case, awarding an attorney's fee is inappropriate.

C. Policy Considerations

Quite apart from the applicability of *Maher*, the policy behind the enactment of § 1988 and the prudential policy of avoiding constitutional questions further supports the conclusion that plaintiffs should be awarded a reasonable fee in this case. "As the legislative history illustrates and as [the Supreme Court] has recognized, § 1988 is a broad grant of authority to courts to award attorney's fees to plaintiffs seeking to vindicate federal constitutional and statutory rights." *Smith v. Robinson*, 468 U.S. 992, 1006 (1984), *overruled on other grounds by* 20 U.S.C. § 1415(*l*). Furthermore, as stated in *Maher*, a fee award based on pendent claims "furthers the Congressional goal of encouraging suits to vindicate constitutional rights without undermining the longstanding judicial policy of avoiding unnecessary decision of important constitutional issues." 448 U.S. at 133 (quoting *Gagne v. Maher*, 594 F.3d 336,

342 (2d Cir. 1979)). We decline the Commissioner's invitation to conclude that the Supreme Court must rule in favor of a plaintiff on a specific, fee-supporting aspect of the case in order for a plaintiff to be considered a prevailing party. Rather, applying the Supreme Court's "generous formulation" of the prevailing party definition, *see Farrar*, 506 U.S. at 109 (quoting *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 433 (1983)), we hold that the district court read § 1988 too narrowly and assumed that it lacked discretion to award plaintiff insurance companies a reasonable attorney's fee.

III. The Foreign Affairs Power and § 1983

The district court concluded that the foreign affairs power did not "implicate a right, privilege or immunity secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States" and therefore did not constitute a § 1983 claim. That conclusion may have been correct as an abstract proposition, but it did not support the further conclusion that plaintiffs were not prevailing parties. Because we reverse the district court on the prevailing party point, we need not reach the question whether the foreign affairs power independently confers private rights. The fact that plaintiffs' Due Process Clause and Commerce Clause claims *are* properly cognizable claims under § 1983 satisfies our inquiry and should result in a fee award to plaintiffs.

IV. Conclusion

For the reasons set forth above, we REVERSE the denial of § 1988 attorney's fees and REMAND this case to the district court with instructions to exercise its discretion to determine a reasonable amount of attorney's fees in accordance with *Hensley*, 461 U.S. 424, and *Webb v. Sloan*, 330 F.3d 1158, 1167-70 (9th Cir. 2003). The award shall

include an allowance for fees and costs incurred in contesting the district court's denial of fees.

GRABER, Circuit Judge, concurring in the result:

I concur in the result for the following reasons.

1. The claim of preemption by the foreign affairs power is not a fee-generating claim, for the reasons ably explained by the district court. In short, the foreign affairs power, like the Supremacy Clause, creates no individual rights enforceable under 28 U.S.C. § 1983. *Cf. Golden State Transit Corp. v. City of Los Angeles*, 493 U.S. 103, 107 (1989) ("[T]he Supremacy Clause, of its own force, does not create rights enforceable under § 1983."); *Associated Gen. Contractors v. Smith*, 74 F.3d 926, 931 (9th Cir. 1996) ("[P]reemption of state law under the Supremacy Clause – being grounded not on individual rights but instead on considerations of power – will not support an action under section 1983, and will not, therefore, support a claim for attorneys' fees under section 1988." (alteration in original) (internal quotation marks omitted)).

2. The due process and Commerce Clause claims are fee-generating claims under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1983 and 1988. But Plaintiffs lost those claims before this court.

3. Plaintiffs' entitlement to fees, then, depends on what happened to the various claims at the Supreme Court. Had Plaintiffs not sought certiorari on the fee-generating claims, or had the Supreme Court upheld our result on those claims, Plaintiffs would not be entitled to fees. *See Mateyko v. Felix*, 924 F.2d 824, 828 (9th Cir. 1991) ("Where, as here, there has been a decision adverse to plaintiff on the section 1983

claim, section 1988 does not authorize the award of attorney's fees."). But neither of those things happened here.

Rather, Plaintiffs sought and received a writ of certiorari on both their fee-generating claims and their non-fee-generating claim. The Court held in Plaintiffs' favor on the non-fee-generating claim without reaching the fee-generating claims at all. Under the principles that we announced in *Carreras v. City of Anaheim*, 768 F.2d 1039, 1050 (9th Cir. 1985), *abrogated on other grounds by Los Angeles Alliance for Survival v. City of Los Angeles*, 993 P.2d 334 (Cal. 2000), and that the Supreme Court set forth in *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122, 132-33 (1980), Plaintiffs are entitled to fees. The Supreme Court had the opportunity to decide the fee-generating claims and chose not to do so;[1] the policies identified in *Carreras* and *Maher* therefore counsel in favor of awarding fees.

[1] The Court's decision thereby leaves our opinion in *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of America v. Low*, 296 F.3d 832 (9th Cir. 2002), *rev'd sub nom American Insurance Ass'n v. Garamendi*, 539 U.S. 396 (2003), with precedential effect on those issues.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORP. OF AMERICA, et al.,

Plaintiffs,

v.

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as the INSURANCE COMMISSIONER OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA,

Defendant.

NO. CIV. S-00-0506 WBS JFM

Consolidated Cases:
No. CIV. S-00-0613 WBS JFM
No. CIV. S-00-0779 WBS JFM
No. CIV. S-00-0875 WBS JFM

MEMORANDUM AND ORDER

(Filed Jan. 29, 2004)

After the Supreme Court's decision in this case, plaintiffs moved the Ninth Circuit for supplemental briefing and oral argument on the issue of attorney fees. The Ninth Circuit ordered the issue of attorney fees transferred to this court for briefing and reconsideration. This matter is now before the court on plaintiffs' motion for attorney fees.

I. Procedural Background

On June 9, 2000, this court issued a preliminary injunction after ruling that plaintiffs had established the likelihood of irreparable harm and a probability of success on the merits of their claims that the California Holocaust Victim Insurance Relief Act ("HVIRA") violates the Commerce Clause and the foreign affairs power. *Gerling Global*

Reinsurance Corp. of Am. ("Gerling Global") v. Quackenbush, Nos. CIV. S-00-0506 WBS JFM, CIV. S-00-0613 WBS JFM, CIV. S-00-0779 WBS JFM, CIV. S-00-0875 WBS JFM, 2000 WL 777978 (E.D. Cal. June 9, 2000).

On February 7, 2001, the Ninth Circuit held that "the district court erred when it decided that HVIRA violates the dormant Commerce Clause and the foreign affairs power." *Gerling Global v. Low*, 240 F.3d 739, 754 (9th Cir. 2001). The Ninth Circuit, however, left the preliminary injunction in place and remanded the matter to this court to address whether the HVIRA violates the Due Process Clause. *Id.*

On October 2, 2001, this court granted plaintiffs' motion for summary judgment, holding that the HVIRA violates the Due Process Clause, and permanently enjoined defendant from enforcing the HVIRA. *Gerling Global v. Low*, 186 F. Supp. 2d 1099 (E.D. Cal. 2001). On October 16, 2001, defendant appealed the grant of summary judgment to the Ninth Circuit. During the pendency of this appeal, plaintiffs moved this court for an award of attorney fees pursuant to, *inter alia*, 42 U.S.C. § 1988. On January 14, 2002, this court denied plaintiffs' motion for an award of attorney fees.

On September 9, 2002, the Ninth Circuit reversed this court's order of October 2, 2001, holding, *inter alia*, that the HVIRA does not violate the Due Process Clause, the Commerce Clause, or the foreign affairs power. *Gerling Global v. Low*, 296 F.3d 832 (9th Cir. 2002). The Ninth Circuit did not address the merits of this court's January 14, 2002, attorney fees ruling. Instead, the Ninth Circuit stated: "[T]he district court improperly concluded that HVIRA was unconstitutional, it also erred in concluding

that Plaintiffs were 'prevailing parties' for the purposes of 42 U.S.C. § 1988. They are not entitled to fees." *Id.*, at 851.

On June 23, 2003, the Supreme Court reversed the Ninth Circuit, holding that the HVIRA violates the foreign affairs power. *Am. Ins. Ass'n v. Garamendi*, 123 S. Ct. 2374 (2003). Subsequently, plaintiffs moved the Ninth Circuit for supplemental briefing and oral argument on the issue of attorney fees. On September 9, 2003, the Ninth Circuit denied plaintiffs' motion and ordered that "[t]he issue of attorney fees is transferred to the district court for briefing and reconsideration." (Oct. 31, 2003 Joint Status Conference Report, Ex. A (*Gerling Global v. Garamendi*, Nos. 01-17023, 01-17433, 02-15282 (9th Cir. Sept. 9, 2003))).

II. Discussion

Section 1988 of Title 42 of the United States Code provides that "[i]n any action or proceeding to enforce a provision of section[] . . . 1983, . . . the court, in its discretion, may allow the prevailing party . . . a reasonable attorney's fee." 42 U.S.C. § 1988(b).

The prevailing party in an action under section 1983 "should ordinarily recover an attorney's fee unless special circumstances would render such an award unjust." *Newman v. Piggie Park Enterprises, Inc.*, 390 U.S. 400, 402 (1968). The court must examine "two factors in determining whether a case involves a 'special circumstance' justifying the denial of fees: (1) whether allowing attorney fees would further the purposes of § 1988, and (2) whether the balance of equities favors or disfavors the denial of fees." *Gilbrook v. City of Westminster*, 177 F.3d 839, 878 (9th Cir. 1999).

In its previous order of January 14, 2002, this court concluded that although allowing attorney fees would further the purposes of section 1988, the balance of equities favored the denial of fees. The court remains persuaded that allowing attorney fees in this case would further the purposes of section 1988. Defendant essentially concedes that an award of fees would serve the section 1988 purpose of deterring lawmakers from enacting unconstitutional legislation in the future. (*See* Def.'s Opp'n at 30). However, plaintiffs have presented a persuasive argument that, in concluding initially that the balance of equities favored the denial of fees, this court may have placed too much weight on the decision of another district court in *Thorsted v. Gregoire*, 841 F. Supp. 1068, 1084 (W.D. Wash. 1994).

The defendant has the burden of showing special circumstances warrant a denial of fees, and the defendant's showing must be a strong one. *Herrington v. County of Sonoma*, 883 F.2d 739, 744 (9th Cir. 1989). As plaintiffs point out, two other courts have declined to adopt the result in *Thorsted*,[1] and the Eleventh Circuit affirmed an award of attorney fees to plaintiff under strikingly similar circumstances to those here. *See Gerling Global v. Nelson*, No. 00-16542-BB (11th Cir. Dec. 7, 2001), aff'g *Gerling Global v. Nelson*, No. 4:99v444-RH (N.D. Fla. Jan. 2, 2001). *Thorsted* is distinguishable because it involved an initiative, rather than an act of the legislature. Upon further reflection, this court is inclined to conclude that

[1] *Morse v. Republican Party of Va.*, 972 F. Supp. 355 (W.D. Va. 1997) and *Kadlick v. Dep't of Mental Health*, 731 N.E.2d 495 (Mass. 2000).

defendant has not met his burden of showing such special circumstances as to justify the disallowance of fees here.

However, for a separate reason, not present at the time of the court's initial order denying attorney fees, the court must nevertheless again deny an award of attorney fees for the plaintiffs.

Section 1988 provides for an award of attorney fees only in certain types of civil rights actions, including actions under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. At the time of the order of January 14, 2002, this court had determined that plaintiffs were prevailing parties on a section 1983 claim because they had prevailed on their Due Process Clause claim. That decision, however, was reversed by the Ninth Circuit. On certiorari, the Supreme Court held in favor of plaintiffs only under the foreign affairs doctrine. The Supreme Court expressly did not consider or decide whether the HVIRA violated the Commerce Clause or the Due Process Clause. *Am. Ins. Ass'n*, 123 S. Ct. at 2385 n.7 ("Because we hold that HVIRA is preempted under the foreign affairs doctrine, we have no reason to address the other questions.").

Section 1983 of Title 42 of the United States Code protects against the "deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws." Under the posture of the case now, unlike when this court issued its previous order denying plaintiffs' motion for award of attorney fees, the court cannot conclude that plaintiffs prevailed on a section 1983 claim. Now, although the court must conclude that plaintiffs prevailed on a claim that the HVIRA was an invalid, unconstitutional statute, the court cannot conclude that plaintiffs prevailed on a claim that the HVIRA deprived them of any right,

privilege, or immunity secured by the Constitution or federal law.

Specifically, the court cannot conclude that the foreign affairs power implicates a right, privilege, or immunity secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States such that it may form the basis of a section 1983 claim. Rather, to the extent that the foreign affairs power is like the Supremacy Clause, it is not a source of federal rights. *Cf. Golden State Transit Corp. v. Los Angeles*, 493 U.S. 103, 107 (1989) ("[T]he Supremacy Clause, of its own force, does not create federal rights enforceable under § 1983."); *Associated Gen. Contractors v. Smith*, 74 F.3d 926, 931 (9th Cir. 1996) ("[P]reemption of state law under the Supremacy Clause – being grounded not on individual rights but instead on considerations of power – will not support an action under section 1983, and will not, therefore, support a claim for attorneys' fees under section 1988.").

The court has reviewed several treatises on the subject, none of which suggest that the foreign affairs power may be the basis of a section 1983 claim. *See* John C. Jeffries, Jr., et al., *Civil Rights Actions: Enforcing the Constitution* Ch. 1, § 5 (2000); Erwin Chemerinsky, *Federal Jurisdiction* § 8.9 (3d ed. 1999); 1A Martin A. Schwartz and John E. Kirklin, *Section 1983 Litigation: Claims and Defenses* Ch. 3 (3d ed. 1997 & Supp. 2003).

Plaintiffs argue that because the foreign affairs doctrine is predicated on the need for the United States to speak with one voice, that being through the President, their action may be viewed as one for the deprivation of rights secured by Presidential orders, which have the force

of laws of the United States. Even assuming that this action can be so characterized, and assuming further that Presidential orders are "laws" within the meaning of section 1983, it would be too far of a stretch to conclude that the kind of Presidential orders involved here, negotiating relief for Holocaust victims and their heirs, were intended to secure any right, privilege, or immunity guaranteed to the plaintiffs in this case.

Although the Commerce Clause and the Due Process Clause may be bases of section 1983 claims, *Dennis v. Higgins*, 498 U.S. 439 (1991) (Commerce Clause); *Paratt v. Taylor*, 451 U.S. 527 (1981) (Due Process Clause); *Paul v. Davis*, 424 U.S. 693 (1976) (Due Process Clause), plaintiffs ultimately did not prevail on either of those claims.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that plaintiffs' motion for attorney fees be, and the same hereby is, DENIED.

DATED: January 29, 2004

/s/ William B. Shubb
WILLIAM B. SHUBB
UNITED STATES
DISTRICT JUDGE

42 U.S.C. § 1983. Civil action for deprivation of rights

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory or the District of Columbia, subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress, except that in any action brought against a judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer's judicial capacity, injunctive relief shall not be granted unless a declaratory decree was violated or declaratory relief was unavailable. For the purposes of this section, any Act of Congress applicable exclusively to the District of Columbia shall be considered to be a statute of the District of Columbia.

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42 U.S.C. § 1988. Proceedings in vindication of civil rights

(b) Attorney's fees

In any action or proceeding to enforce a provision of sections 1981, 1981a, 1982, 1983, 1985, and 1986 of this title, title IX of Public Law 92-318 [20 U.S.C.A. § 1681 et seq.], the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 [42 U.S.C.A. § 2000bb et seq.], the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 [42 U.S.C.A. § 2000cc et seq.], title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 [42 U.S.C.A. § 2000d et seq.], or section 13981 of this title, the court, in its discretion, may allow the prevailing party, other than the United States, a reasonable attorney's fee as part of the costs, except that in any action brought against a

judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer's judicial capacity such officer shall not be held liable for any costs, including attorney's fees, unless such action was clearly in excess of such officer's jurisdiction

No. 04-15332 (consolidated with No. 04-15455)

IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

AMERICAN INSURANCE ASSOCIATION, *et al.*,

Plaintiffs-Appellants,

v.

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as the COMMISSIONER OF INSURANCE FOR THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA,

Defendant-Appellee

Appeal from the United States District Court
For the Eastern District of California
Honorable William B. Shubb, District Judge
Dist. Ct. Docket Nos. CIV-S-00-0613 WBS JFM,
CIV-S-00-0506 WBS JFM, CIV-S-00-0875 WBS JFM

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* * *

B. Because The Supreme Court Granted Review On The Commerce And Due Process Clause Issues In The Case, The Commissioner Cannot Be Treated As Having Prevailed On Those Issues

While the district court made no mention of *Maher*, the Commissioner did attempt below to distinguish the decision, and we assume he will reprise his argument here. Pointing to this Court's rejection of plaintiffs' Commerce and Due Process Clause claims in *Gerling I* and *II*, the Commissioner invoked the rule that precludes the award of fees to a party who prevails on a non-fee claim but *loses* on all of its section 1983 civil rights claims. See, *e.g.*, *Mateyko*, 924 F.2d at 828 (a plaintiff "who loses on his federal claim and recovers only on a pendent state claim is not a prevailing party under section 1988 and may not be awarded fees"). The Commissioner declared that rule applicable here because he was successful in his Commerce and Due Process Clause arguments before this Court and the Supreme Court did not expressly overturn this Court's holdings on those issues. For several reasons, however, the Commissioner's reliance on this principle, as well as his argument that he should be treated as the party prevailing on the section 1983 claims in this case, is insupportable.

1. a. To begin with, the Commissioner commits a fundamental error when he fails to view the fees issue from the perspective of the court that had the last word on the merits of claims that underlie the request for fees – that is, from the perspective of the Supreme Court. The Commissioner's argument might be correct if the Supreme Court had *denied* certiorari review of the Commerce and

Due Process Clause questions presented by plaintiffs, leaving only the foreign affairs issue to be decided. But that is not what the Court did: to the contrary, it *granted* review on all three issues (see *American Ins. Ass'n v. Garamendi*, 537 U.S. 1100 (2003); *Garamendi*, 123 S. Ct. at 2385 n.7), expressly finding it unnecessary to address the Commerce and Due Process Clauses only because the Justices disposed of the case by holding the HVIRA invalid under the foreign affairs doctrine. See *id.*

The Supreme Court thus had both the fee-generating (Commerce and Due Process Clause) and what we are assuming to be the non-fee (foreign affairs doctrine) claims before it when it decided the merits of plaintiffs' suit – and that is precisely what triggers application of the *Maher* rule. So far as *Maher* is concerned, this Court's intervening ruling on the merits regarding the Commerce Clause and due process claims is wholly immaterial. After all, as Congress, the Supreme Court, and this Court each have explained, the point of the *Maher* rule is to avoid having the question of entitlement to fees affect the decision-making processes of the court that is entertaining the merits of the plaintiff's suit by forcing that court to resolve a constitutional claim unnecessarily. But the Commissioner's approach would place courts in just that situation. In this case, for example, the Supreme Court found it unnecessary to decide plaintiffs' Commerce

* * *

Nos. 00-16163, 00-16164, 00-16165, and 00-16182

IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE
CORP. OF AMERICA, et al.,

Plaintiffs-Appellees,

v.

CLARK KELSO in his capacity as
the COMMISSIONER OF INSURANCE OF
THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA,

Defendant-Appellant.

BRIEF FOR AMICUS CURIAE THE UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA IN SUPPORT OF AFFIRMANCE

ON APPEAL FROM A PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION
ENTERED BY THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT
COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALI-
FORNIA, THE HONORABLE WILLIAM B. SHUBB

---

* * *

In view of the importance of the Foundation Agreement, we wish to correct some misunderstandings reflected in the brief of the American Insurance Association ("AIA") concerning the undertakings of the U.S. Government and the impact of the procedures established by the Agreement on existing legal remedies available to American citizens

against private corporations. AIA states that "[t]he federal government . . . has committed to give affected insurers legal peace, including against state litigation and regulatory action," AIA Br. 1, and that the Foundation Agreement "imposes a duty on the United States to achieve 'all-embracing and enduring legal peace' for German companies." AIA Br. 2. The United States has committed to various unprecedented undertakings in the Agreement. As discussed, the United States has committed to file a Statement of Interest in private suits against German companies explaining that "it would be in the foreign policy interests of the United States for the Foundation to be the exclusive remedy and forum for resolving such claims," Foundation Agreement, Art. 2(1), and has committed to "use its best efforts, in a manner it considers appropriate, to achieve the objectives" of the Agreement, Art. 2(2). It has not, however, undertaken a "duty . . . to achieve" legal peace for German companies against state litigation and regulatory action.

Nor does the Foundation Agreement itself preclude individuals from filing suit on their insurance policies in court. *Cf., e.g.*, AIA Br. at 2 (stating that the Agreement "creates on [sic] exclusive remedy and forum"); *id.* at 12 (stating that the Agreement "mandates that insurance claims that come within the scope of . . . ICHEIC 'shall be processed . . . on the basis of such procedures'"). Although the Agreement obligates the German Foundation to process insurance claims against German companies according to ICHEIC procedures, Foundation Agreement, Art. 1(4), it does not mandate

* * *

In the Supreme Court of the United States

No. 02-722

AMERICAN INSURANCE ASSOCIATION, ET AL.,
PETITIONERS

v.

HARRY LOW, INSURANCE COMMISSIONER,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA

No. 02-733

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORP. OF AMERICA,
ET AL., PETITIONERS

v.

HARRY W. LOW, INSURANCE COMMISSIONER,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA

ON PETITIONS FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

BRIEF FOR THE UNITED STATES AS AMICUS CURIAE SUPPORTING PETITIONERS

INTEREST OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States has engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts to assure that the Nations and enterprises responsible for the Holocaust provide some measure of

compensation to their victims. In so doing, the United States has

* * *

(I)

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

No. 02-722

AMERICAN INSURANCE ASSOCIATION, ET AL.,
PETITIONERS

v.

JOHN GARAMENDI, INSURANCE COMMISSIONER,
STATE OF CALIFORNIA

ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI
TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

BRIEF FOR THE UNITED STATES
AS AMICUS CURIAE SUPPORTING PETITIONERS

INTEREST OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States has engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts to assure that the nations and enterprises responsible for the Holocaust provide some measure of justice to their victims. In so doing, the United States has consistently encouraged the use of voluntary, non-adversarial mechanisms for resolving Holocaust victims' claims. California has adopted a different approach. The State has enacted a series of related statutes, including the one challenged here, to provide a separate means of resolving such claims. Such state laws directly interfere with the national

* * *

through coercive regulative and litigation. The United States has concluded that such an approach serves the interests of Holocaust victims and their families throughout the world, including the interests of elderly survivors of the Holocaust in obtaining some measure of justice within their lifetime. The United States also concluded that a non-adversarial approach serves important interests of the Nation in cooperative relations with its European allies.

* * *

(4)

No. 05-272

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In The

Supreme Court of the United States

JOHN GARAMENDI, IN HIS CAPACITY AS COMMISSIONER OF INSURANCE FOR THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA,

Petitioner,

v.

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORPORATION OF AMERICA, US BRANCH, et al.,

Respondents.

On Petition For Writ of Certiorari To The United States Court Of Appeals For The Ninth Circuit

BRIEF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INSURANCE COMMISSIONERS AS *AMICUS CURIAE* IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER

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BRIEF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INSURANCE COMMISSIONERS AS *AMICUS CURIAE* IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER

Pursuant to Supreme Court Rule 37.1, the National Association of Insurance Commissioners ("NAIC") submits this Brief in support of petitioner, John Garamendi, in his capacity as Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California, in respectfully requesting that the Court issue a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit entered in this action.

INTEREST OF THE NAIC[1]

The NAIC is a non-profit corporation whose membership consists of the principal insurance regulatory officials of the fifty States, the District of Columbia, the territories and insular possessions of the United States. Formed in 1871, it is the nation's oldest association of state government officials. In filing this *amicus curiae* brief, the NAIC seeks to demonstrate its interest in this proceeding and to fulfill the mission of the NAIC, to:

> . . . assist state insurance regulators, individually and collectively, in serving the public interest and achieving the following fundamental insurance

[1] Neither counsel for the parties to this matter authored this brief in whole or in part. No person or entity, other than the *amicus curiae*, its members or its counsel, made a monetary contribution to the preparation and submission of this brief. The parties have consented to the filing of this *amicus curiae* brief. Stipulations indicating their consent have been filed with the Clerk of the Court.

> regulatory goals in a responsive, efficient and cost-effective manner, consistent with the wishes of its members:
>
> Protect the public interest;
>
> Promote competitive markets;
>
> Facilitate the fair and equitable treatment of insurance consumers;
>
> Promote the reliability, solvency and financial solidity of insurance institutions; and
>
> Support and improve state regulation of insurance.[2]

The Executive Committee of the NAIC voted to file this *amicus curiae* brief to demonstrate its support of Petitioner John Garamendi, Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California, in this cause. The interest of the NAIC in this matter arises out of the regulatory responsibility vested in each insurance commissioner, director and superintendent to see that all laws respecting insurance companies are executed faithfully and to safeguard the solvency and financial integrity of insurance companies for the benefit of insurance consumers. The commissioners, directors, and superintendents of the various states, the members of the NAIC, are charged with the responsibility of regulating the business of insurance within their jurisdictions pursuant to the McCarran-Ferguson Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1011, *et seq.*, and State insurance laws.

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[2] *See* National Association of Insurance Commissioners, NAIC Mission Statement, *available at* http://www.naic.org/index_about.htm (last visited September 19, 2005).

With regard to the McCarran-Ferguson Act, this Court has stated that "[t]he views of the NAIC are particularly significant, because the Act ultimately passed was based in large part on the NAIC bill." *Group Life and Health Ins. Co. v. Royal Drug Co.*, 440 U.S. 205, 221 (1979).

The NAIC agrees with Commissioner Garamendi that the Ninth Circuit's decision in this case imposing attorneys' fees on the California Department of Insurance will "create significant mischief in many other cases"[3] and will adversely impact the ability of NAIC members to effectively regulate the business of insurance. The NAIC agrees with the analysis of the district court in finding that respondents were not entitled to fees because they had not prevailed on either their Commerce Clause or due process claims. The NAIC supports Commissioner Garamendi in respectfully requesting that this Court issue a writ of certiorari in this matter.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

The Ninth Circuit held in this case that respondents were entitled to an award of attorneys' fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 in spite of the fact that respondents did not prevail on the merits on any claim governed by 42 U.S.C. § 1983. This ruling greatly expands potential liability for attorneys' fees for all entities potentially liable under Section 1983, including the state insurance regulatory authorities that are the members of the NAIC. This expansion of potential liability will chill important state regulatory activities as regulators will face the prospect of

[3] Petition for Writ of Certiorari at p. 9.

paying attorneys' fees to plaintiffs who may prevail against them in litigation on non fee-bearing constitutional and state law grounds even where the court rules that the regulatory conduct at issue does not amount to a Section 1983 violation. Further, it will encourage the addition of meritless Section 1983 claims to any action against a state official and will discourage defendant regulators from appealing adverse state law rulings in cases where plaintiff did not prevail on attached Section 1983 claims. Taken together, these results present a very real threat to the ability of state regulatory officials to supervise the businesses they are charged with regulating and to act in the interests of the consumers they are charged with protecting.

ARGUMENT

Respondents in this case challenged the constitutionality of California's Holocaust Victim Insurance Relief Act, Cal. Ins. Code §§ 13800-13807 (the "HVIRA") on a variety of grounds. This Court ultimately held that the HVIRA was preempted because it conflicted with federal initiatives concerning Holocaust related insurance claims undertaken pursuant to the foreign policy powers granted to the federal executive branch. *American Insurance Ass'n, et al. v. Garamendi*, 539 U.S. 396, 401 (2003) (*Garamendi*). Respondents' Section 1983 claims, those claiming that the HVIRA violated the Commerce Clause and due process, were rejected by the Ninth Circuit in its two rulings on the merits of this case. *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. v. Low*, 240 F.3d 739 (9th Cir. 2001) ("*Gerling I*") (rejecting respondents' Commerce Clause claims) and *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. v. Low*, 296 F.3d

832 (9th Cir. 2002) ("*Gerling II*") (ruling that the HVIRA does not violate due process). This Court did not address the due process and Commerce Clause claims. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 413 n. 7.

Following this Court's decision on the foreign affairs preemption claim, respondents moved for attorneys' fees pursuant to Section 1988.[4] The district court found that respondents were not entitled to fees because they had not prevailed on either their Commerce Clause or due process claims. The Ninth Circuit reversed, holding that respondents were entitled to fees even though it recognized that they had not prevailed on any fee-bearing claim. *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am. v. Garamendi*, 400 F.3d 803 (9th Cir. 2005), rehearing denied, as amended, 410 F.3d 531 (9th Cir. 2005) ("*Gerling III*").

The NAIC agrees with Petitioner Commissioner Garamendi that the Ninth Circuit's decision in this case represents an unwarranted departure from precedent on the issue of entitlement to attorneys' fees under Section 1988. Section 1988 makes it a prerequisite for the award of attorneys' fees that the party seeking fees be the "prevailing party". This Court has previously recognized that victory in the case does not alone satisfy that necessary predicate; the plaintiff must be entitled to relief under Section 1983. *Nat'l Private Truck Council, Inc. v. Okla. Tax Comm'n*, 515 U.S. 582, 592 (1995). *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122 (1980) created a limited exception to the "prevailing

[4] Respondents first moved for attorneys' fees after the initial summary judgment ruling and that motion was denied by the district court. The Ninth Circuit then rejected all of respondents' claims on the merits and ruled that they were not entitled to fees because they were not prevailing parties. *Gerling II*, 296 F.3d at 851.

party" rule in cases where a plaintiff's substantial 1983 claims were never reached for prudential reasons. The *Maher* rule is inapplicable where, as here, the 1983 claims were litigated and plaintiff lost.

The members of the NAIC, in their capacity as the chief insurance regulators of their respective states, may be subject to suits for injunctive relief under Section 1983 for any official act, be it the enactment of a regulation or administrative practice, or the application of an existing statute, regulation or administrative practice to an insurer doing business in their state. The Ninth Circuit's ruling in this case, which makes it possible for plaintiffs to be awarded attorneys' fees in Section 1983 cases even after losing on those claims, increases the expense and expands the risk associated with Section 1983 litigation. The likely result of this expanded availability of fees is that any plaintiff who brings a lawsuit on state law or non-fee bearing constitutional grounds will append a Section 1983 claim so that they may be awarded fees even if they do not prevail on that claim. Further, a defendant regulator who prevails on a Section 1983 claim may be reluctant to appeal an adverse ruling on a state law or non-fee bearing claim for fear that fees will be awarded if plaintiff cross-appeals the Section 1983 claims. Application of the Ninth Circuit's ruling in that scenario could result in an award of attorneys' fees even if the reviewing court never reaches the Section 1983 claims, as in the present case.

More troubling than the impact on litigation is the potential chilling effect the Ninth Circuit's ruling has on the regulatory activities of state insurance departments and other entities potentially liable under Section 1983. Certainly all state insurance commissioners, directors and superintendents are well aware that their actions must be

within constitutional parameters. Under *Gerling III*, however, these officials have to be concerned not only that they succeed in any constitutional challenges, but also that they are not challenged through litigation in the first place. State regulators now face a new risk from litigation, being required to pay attorneys' fees under *Gerling III*, even where a court rules for the regulators and finds that their actions did not violate Section 1983.

The energies and resources of state insurance regulators are focused on protecting insurance consumers in their state and insuring the financial solvency of insurers doing business in their state. Regulators should not be stymied in their efforts towards achieving these goals by the fear of large awards of attorneys' fees if those efforts are challenged and decided on non-fee bearing grounds.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Court should issue a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

Respectfully submitted,

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Petitioner,

v.

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORPORATION OF AMERICA, US BRANCH, ET AL.,
Respondents.

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

Brief of the National League of Cities, International Municipal Lawyers Association, New Jersey State League of Municipalities, League of California Cities, and California State Association of Counties, as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Petitioner

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STATEMENT OF INTEREST

This case is vitally important to amici, whose members include state and local governments throughout the United States.[1] The National League of Cities is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal governments throughout the United States. It is a resource and advocate for over 18,000 cities, towns and villages. The International Municipal Lawyers Association is a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional organization whose 1,400 members include local governments of all kinds, state municipal leagues, and attorneys who represent local governments. The New Jersey State League of Municipalities is a voluntary organization including in its membership all 566 New Jersey municipalities. The League of California Cities is an association of 476 California cities united in promoting the general welfare of cities and their residents. The California State Association of Counties advocates the interests of the 58 California counties.

The special interest of these amici in this case lies in the impact the Ninth Circuit's decision will have on local governments, if not overturned. As explained in greater detail below, local governments, already facing high litigation costs, will now be faced with increased federal litigation as more plaintiffs assert invalid § 1983 claims to lay the groundwork for an award of § 1988 fees.

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[1] This brief was not authored in whole or in part by any counsel for a party, and no person or entity other than the amici, their members, and their counsel made a monetary contribution to the preparation or submission of this brief. The parties have consented in writing to the filing of this brief.

SUMMARY OF LEGAL ARGUMENT

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that an award of attorney's fees is appropriate under 42 U.S.C. § 1988 ("§ 1988") even where the plaintiff lost on all its "fee generating" 42 U.S.C. § 1983 ("§ 1983") claims in the last court to consider those claims on the merits. This ruling conflicts with at least two of this Court's precedents, and creates a conflict with the law as enunciated by many other federal and state appellate courts. It will encourage plaintiffs to bring invalid constitutional claims in run-of-the-mill state lawsuits in the hope that, even if the constitutional claims are rejected in the lower court, they will be awarded attorney's fees under § 1988. Reversal of the decision is necessary to resolve the conflict in the law and to prevent the consequences that will follow if the decision is left undisturbed.

LEGAL ARGUMENT

I. BY AWARDING FEES UNDER § 1988 TO PLAINTIFFS WITH UNSUCCESSFUL § 1983 CLAIMS, THE NINTH CIRCUIT CREATED A CONFLICT WITH AT LEAST TWO OF THIS COURT'S DECISIONS.

A. The Ninth Circuit's Decision Conflicts with its Principal Authority, a Footnote in this Court's 1980 Decision in *Maher v. Gagne*.

The court below based its fees decision on a footnote of dicta in *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122, 132-33 (1980) (which in turn was derived from a footnote in the Committee Report accompanying H.R. 15460, the House counterpart to what became § 1988).[2] Under the *Maher* footnote, a plaintiff

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[2] H.R. Rep. No. 94-1558, 94th Cong., 2d Sess. 4 n.7 (1976) ("House Committee Report"), reprinted in Staff of Senate Comm.

is entitled to attorney's fees in one of two circumstances: (1) there was a determination of his fee generating claims, and that determination was favorable; or (2) there was no determination of his fee generating claims because of judicial reluctance to reach constitutional claims unnecessarily, but the plaintiff was successful in his non-fee generating claims and it is determined that the fee generating claims were "substantial" under the jurisdictional test in *Hagans v. Lavine*, 415 U.S. 528 (1974). *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 132 n.15; House Committee Report, *supra* note 2, at 4 n.7.[3] Neither of these conditions was present in this case, yet the Ninth Circuit found that the *Maher* footnote entitled Plaintiffs to recover

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on the Judiciary, 94th Cong., 2d Sess., CIVIL RIGHTS ATTORNEY'S FEES AWARDS ACT OF 1976 SOURCE BOOK 212 (Comm. Print 1976). The *Maher* footnote constitutes dicta because both the Court's opinion and Justice Powell's concurrence stated that "there is no need to reach the question whether a federal court could award attorney's fees against a State based on a statutory, non-civil-rights claim." *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 130; *id.* at 135 (Powell, J., concurring in relevant part) (noting "that the Court has reserved the question 'whether a federal court could award attorney's fees against a State based on a statutory, non-civil-rights claim.'").

[3] A federal claim is "substantial" for these purposes unless it is so frivolous that a federal court would lack jurisdiction to hear it. *See Maher*, 448 U.S. at 132 n.15 (citing the "substantiality" test in *Hagans*); *Hagans*, 415 U.S. at 542-43 (a federal claim is "substantial" unless "the cause of action alleged is so patently without merit as to justify, even under the qualifications noted, the court's dismissal for want of jurisdiction," or it is "so insubstantial, implausible, foreclosed by prior decisions of this Court or otherwise completely devoid of merit as not to involve a federal controversy within the jurisdiction of the District Court, whatever may be the ultimate resolution of the federal issues on the merits.").

their fees under § 1988. (Petitioners' Appendix ("App.")) 11-13.

The Ninth Circuit's decision conflicts with *Maher*. *Maher* and the House Committee Report state that, "[t]o the extent a plaintiff joins a claim under one of the statutes enumerated in H.R. 15460 with a claim that does not allow attorney fees, that plaintiff, if it prevails on the non-fee claim, is entitled to a determination on the other claim for the purpose of awarding counsel fees." *See Maher*, 448 U.S. at 132 n.15 (quoting House Committee Report, *supra* note 2, at 4 n.7). If a plaintiff prevailing on a non-fee-generating claim is "entitled to a determination on the other [fee-generating] claim for the purpose of awarding counsel fees," *id.*, it follows that such a determination, when made, should matter. To the Ninth Circuit, it did not. There was indeed a determination of the plaintiffs' fee generating claims, but that determination (made by the Ninth Circuit) was *unfavorable*. And although this Court granted certiorari, this Court ruled only on the non-fee-generating claim, leaving undisturbed the Court of Appeals' ruling that the fee-generating claims lacked merit. An award of attorney's fees under these circumstances constitutes a dramatic expansion of parties' entitlement to fee awards under § 1988.

Even if additional latitude may be available where a court was "reluctant to resolve" the fee-generating claim, *id.*, a court that was *not* reluctant to resolve a constitutional claim, but rejected that claim on the merits, can find no basis in § 1988, *Maher*, or the House Committee Report to award fees. In the words of the late Judge Alvin B. Rubin of the Fifth Circuit:

> [§ 1988] was adopted because the actions in which fees are allowed vindicate rights based on the federal constitution or federal statutes. If it is determined that

> no constitutional right was violated, the predicate for the award of fees vanishes.

McDonald v. Doe, 748 F.2d 1055, 1057 (5th Cir. 1984); *see also* Comment, *Civil Rights Attorneys' Fees in Cases Resolved on State Pendent and Federal Statutory Grounds*, 130 U. Pa. L. Rev. 488, 519 (1981) ("Pennsylvania Comment") (it would be a "distortion of the Act's purpose" if a plaintiff is permitted to receive fees in spite of the possible lack of merit of the underlying civil rights claim).

B. The Ninth Circuit's Decision Conflicts with this Court's 1995 Decision in *National Private Truck Council*.

The Ninth Circuit's decision also conflicts with this Court's more recent pronouncement in *Nat'l Private Truck Council, Inc. v. Okla. Tax Comm'n*, 515 U.S. 582, 592 (1995), that "when no relief can be awarded pursuant to Section 1983, no attorney's fees can be awarded under Section 1988."[4] The Ninth Circuit's initial opinion made no reference to *National Private Truck Council*. However, on rehearing, the panel left in place its holding and its opinion, but added a footnote acknowledging this Court's ruling in *National Private Truck Council*. App. 3. The Ninth Circuit merely stated that "[i]f a plaintiff does not have a substantial, properly cognizable § 1983 claim, then § 1988 attorney's fees may not be awarded. In addition, if the Supreme Court in

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[4] *Accord Smith v. Robinson*, 468 U.S. 992, 1009 n.12 (1984) ("There is, of course, nothing wrong with seeking relief on the basis of certain statutes because those statutes provide for attorney's fees, or with amending a complaint to include claims that provide for attorney's fees. *But where it is clear that the claims that provide for attorney's fees had nothing to do with a plaintiff's success, Hensley v. Eckerhart*, [461 U.S. 424 (1983)] requires that fees not be awarded on the basis of those claims.") (emphasis added).

this case had expressly affirmed *Gerling II's* rejection of plaintiff's due process and Commerce Clause claims, then plaintiff would not be entitled to § 1988 fees." App. 3.

The Ninth Circuit's reasons for disregarding *National Private Truck Council* have little to do with what this Court actually stated in that case. The fact that a § 1983 claim is not so frivolous that it fails the "substantiality" test does not mean that "relief can be awarded pursuant to Section 1983." *Contrast Nat'l Private Truck Council,* 515 U.S. at 592.[5] Indeed, because summary judgment was granted against plaintiffs' § 1983 claim, "relief" could *never* "be awarded pursuant to Section 1983." Moreover, the Ninth Circuit's reasoning ignores the basic fact, noted by Judge Graber in her concurrence and uncontradicted in the panel's opinion, that *Gerling II's* rejection of plaintiffs' fee-generating claims has binding, precedential effect. App. 19, n.1.

II. THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S DECISION CREATED A CONFLICT WITH OTHER STATE AND FEDERAL APPEALS COURTS.

Not only does the decision below conflict with this Court's prior decisions, it also creates a conflict with other state and federal appeals courts. As this Court has recognized, the "principal purpose for which [this Court uses its] certiorari jurisdiction . . . is to resolve conflicts among United States courts of appeals and state courts concerning the meaning of provisions of federal law." *Braxton v. United States,* 500 U.S. 344, 347 (1991). The clear majority of federal appeals courts have held that § 1988 precludes awards of attorneys

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[5] "It will be a rare case when plaintiffs cannot construct a 'substantial' procedural due process claim within the *Hagans* Court's definition of that word." Pennsylvania Comment, *supra* page 5, at 508.

fees to plaintiffs whose § 1983 claims were rejected.[6] In addition, the Ninth Circuit's interpretation of § 1988 conflicts with the decisions of many state appellate courts.[7] As recognized by the Second Circuit, *National Private Truck Council* "is directly on point" in answering whether a party whose federal civil rights claim fails may seek fees under § 1988. *Bonner,* 178 F.3d at 596. The Ninth Circuit has created a conflict in the law by holding otherwise.

III. IF NOT OVERTURNED, THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S DECISION WILL ENCOURAGE THE INCLUSION OF INVALID § 1983 CLAIMS IN CASES PROPERLY RESOLVED UNDER OTHER LAWS.

A. If Left Undisturbed, the Ninth Circuit's Decision will Cause Plaintiffs with Good State-Law Claims to Plead Poor Constitutional Claims, Burdening both the Courts and Local Governments.

The Ninth Circuit's logic provides a strong incentive for plaintiffs to insert invalid § 1983 claims into run-of-the-mill

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[6] *See, e.g., Bonner v. Guccione,* 178 F.3d 581, 595 (2d Cir. 1999); *Luria Bros. & Co. v. Allen,* 672 F.2d 347, 358 (3d Cir. 1982); *Haywood v. Ball,* 634 F.2d 740, 742-43 (4th Cir. 1980); *Raley v. Fraser,* 747 F.2d 287, 290-91 (5th Cir. 1984); *McDonald,* 748 F.2d at 1057; *Reel v. Ark. Dep't of Corr.,* 672 F.2d 693, 697-98 (8th Cir. 1982).

[7] *See, e.g., Or. State Police Officers Ass'n, Inc. v. State,* 783 P.2d 7, 11 (Or. 1989), *cert. denied,* 498 U.S. 810 (1990); *Jackson v. Inhabitants of the Town of Searsport,* 456 A.2d 852, 855-56 (Me.), *cert. denied,* 464 U.S. 825 (1983); *Gumbhir v. Kan. State Bd. of Pharmacy,* 646 P.2d 1078, 1087-90 (Kan. 1982); *Commonwealth v. Lotz Realty Co.,* 376 S.E.2d 54, 59 (Va. 1989).

tort suits and challenges to administrative decisions, in the hope that, *even if those constitutional claims are rejected on the merits*, the plaintiff will receive a fee award. This would impose a tremendous burden on local governments already stretched thin by the proliferation of law suits being filed against them. It would also burden the federal courts by causing plaintiffs to "make a federal case" out of state law claims. As a result, justice will be further delayed for other parties in the federal courts, including plaintiffs with valid § 1983 claims.

The perverse incentive created by this decision will be present in the quite common setting in which a plaintiff has a claim that is promising under state or statutory law, but does not rise to a level of constitutional concern. Such cases are common because, typically, constitutional limitations on governments are exceeded only in extraordinary situations. *See County of Sacramento v. Lewis*, 523 U.S. 833, 846 (1998) (noting that in its evaluations of "abusive executive action," this Court has held that "only the most egregious official conduct can be said to be 'arbitrary in the constitutional sense'"). Indeed, the amici see a recurring pattern of such suits. Disappointed land-use applicants often have a good argument that their applications were denied in violation of state or local law, but weak arguments that the denials constituted a taking, deprivation of due process, or violation of equal protection. *See, e.g., River Park, Inc. v. City of Highland Park*, 23 F.3d 164, 165 (7th Cir. 1994) (in property-rights disputes, "state courts often afford relief on facts that do not support a federal claim"). Prisoners and detainees often have a good argument that they received negligent medical attention, but a weak argument that such treatment constituted cruel and unusual punishment. *See, e.g., Bailey v. Wood*, 909 F.2d 1197, 1201 (8th Cir. 1990) ("the compensation of prisoners for harms received in prison

is better regulated in state courts through ordinary tort actions. The burden of proof on the plaintiff is much less and the liability of the state can be placed on the supervisory correctional officers through principles of agency."). Thus, it will often be the case that an appellate court will more easily rule in favor of plaintiffs first on non-constitutional theories, then stop. *See, e.g., Triple G Landfills, Inc. v. Board of Comm'rs of Fountain County, Ind.*, 977 F.2d 287, 292 (7th Cir. 1992) (declining to reach dormant commerce clause claim because county ordinance is invalid under state law). The Ninth Circuit's decision created an added incentive for plaintiffs to tack a weak § 1983 claim onto a promising state-law claim, in the hope that the §1983 claim is either not adjudicated or dismissed without appellate review. In either setting, under the Ninth Circuit's reasoning the inclusion of the invalid § 1983 claim likely opens the door to an award of attorney's fees under § 1988 for reasons unrelated to whether the civil rights of the plaintiff were actually violated. *McDonald*, 748 F.2d at 1057.

The consequences of the decision will especially burden local governments in at least two respects. First, as plaintiffs more often add meritless § 1983 claims for the sake of securing fees, local governments will be forced to divert more funds to secure their dismissal. Second, the decision extends liability for attorney's fees to cases where § 1983 claims were rejected but the plaintiff prevailed on nonconstitutional grounds. Because so many § 1983 claims are rejected, the extension of potential attorney's fees liability to this new class of cases poses a very significant new risk.

B. The Ninth Circuit Refused to Limit its Precedent to Cases Where this Court Grants, but Declines to Exercise, Review of Fee-Generating Claims.

In opposing *en banc* review, Respondents argued that the case presented "unusual factual circumstances." However, the Ninth Circuit's decision was not so limited.[8] The Ninth Circuit's decision provided no principled reason for limiting the impact of its holding to cases that reach this Court. The Ninth Circuit necessarily held that a fee-generating claim should be considered "unaddressed" even after it has been dismissed on the merits, if the last court to review the claim did not also address its merits when given the opportunity. App.11, 15. Thus, unless it is set aside by this Court, the precedent established by the Ninth Circuit will extend to a wide variety of cases.

What mattered to the Ninth Circuit was whether the final court that heard the fee-generating claims had dismissed them on the merits. While in this case, this Court was that final court, the Ninth Circuit articulated no principle that would confine the scope of its logic to claims that reach this Court. No such principle exists. That is because the grant of certiorari by this Court does not automatically vacate the decision to be reviewed. *See* Sup. Ct. R. 16. As this Court has recognized, its decision to grant certiorari "depends on numerous factors other than the perceived correctness of the judgment we are asked to review." *Ross v. Moffitt*, 417 U.S. 600, 617 (1974). Even after certiorari is granted, the decision remains valid and precedential unless and until it is vacated.

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[8] In their amicus brief in support of the petition for en banc review, Amici International Municipal Lawyers Association and New Jersey State League of Municipalities asked, in the alternative, that the Ninth Circuit modify the panel decision to limit it to its facts, but the Ninth Circuit declined to do so.

In contrast with procedures followed in California state appellate courts, "[n]o federal rule provides for 'depublication' of a court of appeals' decision once the [U.S.] Supreme Court grants certiorari or notes appellate jurisdiction. The lower court opinion thus remains available as citable precedent on issues not reached by the Supreme Court." *Agric. Labor Relations Bd. v. Tex-Cal Land Mgmt., Inc.*, 739 P.2d 140, 147 n.12 (Cal. 1987).[9]

Certiorari is necessary because the Ninth Circuit's logic will apply with equal force when an intermediate appellate court fails to reach the merits of fee-generating claims that had been dismissed on the merits by a district court. That circumstance is quite common. Because constitutional claims are often the most difficult to establish, courts dismiss many before trial, while non-constitutional claims go forward. A plaintiff might then prevail at trial, or lose at trial and then prevail on appeal. If a plaintiff can prevail (at trial or on appeal) on non-constitutional grounds, it is particularly unlikely that the appellate court will have the opportunity and the need to reach the merits of the trial court's dismissal of the constitutional claims. Under such circumstances, the

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[9] Even after this Court reversed the Ninth Circuit's judgment on other grounds, the Ninth Circuit's dismissal of the fee-generating claims remained valid. *See* App. 19 at n.1 (Graber, J., concurring in the result); *Cent. Pines Land Co. v. United States*, 274 F.3d 881, 893 n.57 (5th Cir. 2001) (per P. Higgenbotham, J.) (explaining "the important difference between our treatment of a panel opinion after *vacatur* by the Supreme Court and our treatment when a judgment is reversed on other grounds"); *Frank v. United Airlines, Inc.*, 216 F.3d 845, 856 (9th Cir. 2000) (in a private-sector employment case "the [U.S. Supreme] Court's vacation of our decision [on Eleventh Amendment grounds, in a previous suit against a state] has no bearing on the correctness of our conclusion that a disparate impact claim is cognizable under the ADEA.").

Ninth Circuit's logic would entitle the plaintiff to receive attorneys' fees unless the intermediate appellate court also reaches the merits of the constitutional claims, and affirms their dismissal.

In any event, the hypothetical possibility that the Ninth Circuit's decision could be limited to its facts does not protect amici. That is because such a distinction will likely be lost on those who bring suits against governments. When drafting a complaint, no litigant will be able to predict which court will be the highest to address their case, or whether any court will exercise discretionary review. But litigants will appreciate that the inclusion of a § 1983 claim in the suit is a necessary first step, and that they may now lose on the merits of that claim without necessarily losing the ability to recover fees under § 1988.

IV. THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S DECISION UPSETS THE BALANCE OF FEDERAL AND STATE AUTHORITY.

Ironically, Plaintiffs who filed a lawsuit to restore the balance of state and federal authority have now established a precedent that will upset that balance in the opposite direction. If, as the Ninth Circuit has now ruled, a plaintiff may lose on the merits of all fee-generating claims while still recovering fees based on its success in non-fee-generating claims, the impact will be felt in cases that arise under state laws and statutes. Allowing success on non-fee-generating claims to become the functional equivalent of success on fee-generating claims, through clever pleading, will compromise federalism in at least two respects.

First, it will override the choices made by state legislators to follow the "American Rule" when providing remedies for state-law violations. Legislators and governors who chose not to include fee-shifting provisions in their state statutes will

have their legislative choices nullified, as plaintiffs shift their fees through the mere expedient of tacking on a claim under § 1983 that is slightly better than frivolous. As the Maine Supreme Court observed when rejecting the path chosen by the court below:

> To allow attorney's fees under section 1988 to parties who assert meritless federal claims along with valid state claims would in many cases effectively abrogate the American Rule. Any person with a claim founded in state law against a state or its subdivisions would have every incentive to interject a section 1983 claim into the action, regardless of its validity.

Jackson, 456 A.2d at 856. Such an approach would impair this Court's longstanding principle that "[e]xcept in matters governed by the Federal Constitution or by acts of Congress, the law to be applied in any case is the law of the state." *Erie R.R. Co. v. Tompkins*, 304 U.S. 64, 78 (1938). The remedy for a claim governed exclusively by state law would include a fee award not authorized by state law.

Second, as plaintiffs respond to the added incentive to include invalid federal claims in garden-variety state law disputes, even more state-law disputes will shift into the federal court system. Under principles of comity, this Court should avoid constructions of federal statutes that create such a result. "Due regard for the rightful independence of state governments requires that federal courts scrupulously confine their own jurisdiction to the precise limits which the statute has defined." *Syngenta Crop Prot., Inc. v. Henson*, 537 U.S. 28, 32 (2002) (quoting *Healy v. Ratta*, 292 U.S. 263, 270 (1934)) (ellipses omitted). As this Court has held on several occasions, "[n]eedless decisions of state law should be avoided [by federal courts] both as a matter of comity and to promote justice between the parties[.]" *United Mine Workers*

of Am. v. Gibbs, 383 U.S. 715, 726 (1966). "Recognition of a federal court's wide latitude to decide ancillary questions of state law does not imply that it must tolerate a litigant's effort to impose upon it what is in effect only a state law case." *Id.* at 727.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the National League of Cities, International Municipal Lawyers Association, New Jersey State League of Municipalities, the League of California Cities, and California State Association of Counties, as Amici Curiae, respectfully request the Court to grant the Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,

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In the Supreme Court of the United States

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California
Petitioner,

v.

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORPORATION OF AMERICA, , ET AL.,
Respondents.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

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QUESTION PRESENTED

In *Maher* v. *Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122 (1980), and subsequent decisions, this Court held that a plaintiff who prevails on non-civil rights claims that arise out of the same nucleus of operative fact as substantial, unresolved 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claims should be treated as a prevailing party who is entitled to attorneys' fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988. The question here is whether this rule applies to the facts of this case, where (a) the plaintiff advanced both substantial fee and non-fee claims that arose out of the same nucleus of operative fact; (b) the Ninth Circuit rejected both sets of claims; and (c) this Court reversed and ruled for the plaintiff on the non-fee claim, while expressly finding it unnecessary to resolve the remaining constitutional claims that were presented under Section 1983.

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STATEMENT

This case involves the rules governing entitlement to attorneys' fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988. There is no dispute about the governing principle: the parties agree that, as a general matter, fees *are* available when a civil rights plaintiff advances both fee-generating and non-fee claims, the court rules for the plaintiff on the non-fee claim, and the court does not resolve the fee-creating civil rights claim. The question presented in the petition addresses the application of this settled principle to an unusual factual setting, in which the plaintiff advances both fee and non-fee claims, loses on both sets of claims in the lower court, and prevails on the non-fee claim in a higher court that declines to resolve the fee claim.

Review of this question is not warranted. There is no conflict on the issue in the courts of appeals. The question presented arises with great infrequency. And the decision below faithfully applied the principles set out by this Court. Here, this Court ruled for the plaintiffs on the merits on what the Ninth Circuit assumed to be a non-fee claim, finding it unnecessary to resolve the remaining constitutional claims that were presented under Section 1983. As the court below correctly recognized, the plaintiffs should not now be penalized when entitlement to attorneys' fees is considered simply because this Court, when resolving the case in the plaintiffs' favor on the merits, exercised restraint in declining to decide constitutional claims unnecessarily.

1. This dispute grows out of respondents' successful challenge to the constitutionality of a California statute, the Holocaust Victim Insurance Relief Act of 1999 ("HVIRA"). That law imposed extensive obligations on insurance companies doing business in the State to disclose the details of insurance policies in effect in Europe at any time between 1920 and 1945. See *American Ins. Ass'n* v. *Garamendi* ("*Garamendi*"), 539 U.S. 396 (2003). This disclosure obligation ex-

tended to policies issued by any company "related" to the insurer, "whether or not the companies were related during the time when the policies subject to disclosure were sold" (*id.* at 409-410), and applied to "policies sold to anyone during that time." *Id.* at 410. The penalty for noncompliance was "suspension of the company's license to do business in the State." *Ibid.*

At the time that the HVIRA was debated and enacted, the Federal Government took a very different approach to the problem of obtaining meaningful compensation for Holocaust victims. "From the beginning, the Government's position * * * stressed mediated settlement 'as an alternative to endless litigation' promising little relief to Holocaust survivors." *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 405 (citation omitted). To this end, the United States and Germany entered into an executive agreement (the "German Foundation Agreement"), signed by President Clinton and German Chancellor Schroeder, that committed Germany to establish and fund a foundation that would compensate those who suffered at the hands of German companies during the Nazi era. *Id.* at 405-408 (citing 39 INT'L LEGAL MATERIALS 1298 (2000)). For its part, the United States agreed that, because German companies should have "some expectation of security from lawsuits in United States courts" in exchange for their participation in the Foundation, the Federal Government would inform courts that it is "'in the foreign policy interests of the United States for the Foundation to be the exclusive forum and remedy for the resolution of all asserted claims against German companies.'" *Id.* at 405-406 (citation omitted).

Because the HVIRA departed dramatically from the Federal Government's policy regarding compensation for Holocaust survivors, the United States expressed strong disapproval of the statute. After California's Commissioner of Insurance, the petitioner here, issued administrative subpoenas to several subsidiaries of European insurance companies pursuant to the HVIRA, then-Deputy Secretary of State

Eizenstat – the President's representative for Holocaust issues – "[i]mmediately" wrote to both the Commissioner and California's Governor, complaining that the HVIRA "'has the unfortunate effect of damaging the one effective means now at hand to process quickly and completely unpaid insurance claims from the Holocaust period.'" *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 411 (citation omitted).

As this Court observed, however, "[t]hese expressions of the National Government's concern proved to be of no consequence." *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 411. The Commissioner – who had vigorously lobbied for enactment of the HVIRA, despite questions raised at the time about the constitutionality and enforceability of the statute (see Ct. App. E.R. 183, 198) – issued what this Court described as an "ultimatum" to insurance companies subject to the HVIRA. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 412. He announced "that he would enforce HVIRA to its fullest, requiring the affected insurers to make the disclosures, leave the State voluntarily, or lose their licenses." *Id.* at 411-412

Respondents then brought suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, contending that the HVIRA violated the Commerce Clause, Due Process Clause, and foreign affairs principle of the U.S. Constitution. The district court ruled for respondents on Commerce Clause and foreign affairs grounds, striking down the HVIRA; on the Commissioner's appeal, the Ninth Circuit reversed. *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am.* v. *Low*, 240 F.3d 739 (9th Cir. 2001). On remand, the district court then ruled for respondents on due process grounds; the Commissioner again appealed and the Ninth Circuit again reversed. *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am.* v. *Low*, 296 F.3d 832 (9th Cir. 2002). This Court in turn granted respondents' petition for certiorari on all three grounds. *American Ins. Ass'n* v. *Garamendi*, 537 U.S. 1100 (2003). The Court ultimately reversed the Ninth Circuit, holding that the HVIRA violates the Constitution's foreign affairs power and agreements executed by the President pursuant to that

power. *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 413-429. Having reached that conclusion, the Court "ha[d] no reason to address" the Commerce and Due Process Clause questions. *Id.* at 413 n.7.

2. After this Court's ruling, respondents sought attorneys' fees under Section 1988. The district court denied the request. Pet. App. 20-26. The court recognized that Commerce and Due Process Clause claims are cognizable under Section 1983 and that a plaintiff who prevails on such claims is entitled to an award of fees under Section 1988. But the court reasoned that the Constitution's foreign affairs power (and executive agreements executed under it) do *not* create a "right, privilege, or immunity" within the meaning of Section 1983 and that a plaintiff who prevails on foreign affairs grounds accordingly is not entitled to fees under Section 1988. *Id.* at 24-26. Because this Court had ruled for respondents on foreign affairs grounds, the district court held fees unavailable here.

The court of appeals reversed. Pet. App. 1-19. The court noted that "Due Process Clause and Commerce Clause claims are both properly cognizable, fee-supporting claims under § 1983," and it assumed for purposes of its decision "that the foreign affairs power does not confer rights within the meaning of § 1983." *Id.* at 9. The court thus was "faced with the question whether a court, in an action containing both fee-supporting § 1983 claims and a claim which may not independently support a fee award, may deprive plaintiffs of attorney's fees by grounding its ruling on the non-fee generating claim." *Ibid.* The court concluded that "[a]nswering this question in the affirmative would be inconsistent with both Supreme Court and Ninth Circuit precedent." *Ibid.*

The court of appeals explained that, under the doctrine of *Maher* v. *Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122 (1980), an award of fees is appropriate where a plaintiff prevails on a "'non-civil-rights claim pendent to a substantial constitutional claim or in one in which both a statutory and a substantial constitutional

claim are settled favorably to the plaintiff without adjudication.'" Pet. App. 10 (quoting *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 132). That rule "applies equally to the determination of pendent claims through litigation." *Ibid.* "Under this formulation," the court continued, "for the purpose of qualifying a prevailing party, an unaddressed, fee-supporting claim supports an award of fees if it is both substantial and arises from a common nucleus of operative fact with a dispositive, non-fee-supporting claim addressed by the court." *Id.* at 12. And under this doctrine, fees should be awarded "where, as here, the court of highest authority to hear a case avoids resolution of a fee-supporting federal claim." *Id.* at 11.

The court of appeals added that it made no difference to application of this rule that prior decisions of the Ninth Circuit had rejected the fee-supporting Commerce and Due Process Clause claims before final disposition of the merits by this Court. The court explained that, "[s]o long as an unaddressed, fee-supporting claim meets the substantiality test * * *, and the end result of the litigation grants a plaintiff his desired relief, the unaddressed claim may support a fee award regardless of the decision of the court below." Pet. App. 15. See also *id.* at 19 (Graber, J., concurring in the result) ("The Supreme Court had the opportunity to decide the fee-generating claims and chose not to do so; the policies identified in * * * *Maher* therefore counsel in favor of awarding fees.") (footnote omitted).

Even apart from the rule of *Maher*, the court of appeals found that "the policy behind enactment of § 1988 and the prudential policy of avoiding constitutional questions further supports the conclusion that plaintiffs should be awarded a reasonable fee in this case." Pet. App. 16. The court therefore "decline[d] the Commissioner's invitation to conclude that the Supreme Court must rule in favor of a plaintiff on a specific, fee-supporting aspect of the case in order for a plaintiff to be considered a prevailing party." *Id.* at 17. Because the court held fees available on that basis, it declined to

"reach the question whether the foreign affairs power independently confers private rights" that are enforceable under Section 1983. *Ibid.* The court remanded the case to the district court so that an appropriate fee could be calculated; those proceedings are now pending. The full Ninth Circuit denied a petition for rehearing en banc without dissent.

REASONS FOR DENYING THE PETITION

This case does not warrant further review. The question presented by the Commissioner is whether fees are available under Section 1988 when (a) the plaintiff advances both fee and non-fee claims; (b) a lower court rejects both sets of claims; and (c) a higher court reverses on non-fee grounds while not reaching the fee claims. That issue is an unusual one of limited practical importance that arises with great infrequency; so far as we are aware, it has been addressed in only three cases since Section 1988's enactment. There is no division on the question in the courts of appeals. And the decision below is wholly consistent both with this Court's rulings and with the policies of Section 1988. The petition for certiorari, submitted while the case is in an interlocutory posture, accordingly should be denied.

1. The Decision Below Is Wholly Consistent With The Holdings Of This Court

a. The Commissioner's principal contention is one that goes to the merits of the decision below: he argues that the Ninth Circuit departed from *Maher* and other decisions of this Court addressing entitlement to fees under Section 1988. See Pet. 7-8, 13-15. But the relevant rules in this area of the law have long been settled and noncontroversial. Section 1988 makes attorneys' fees available to "the prevailing party" in Section 1983 litigation. Under the Court's "generous formulation of the term, plaintiffs may be considered 'prevailing parties' for attorney's fee purposes if they succeed on any significant issue in litigation which achieves some of the benefit the parties sought in bringing suit."

Farrar v. Hobby, 506 U.S. 103, 109 (1992) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). In this case, of course, plaintiffs achieved *all* of the benefits they sought, "obtain[ing] an enforceable judgment against the defendant." *Farrar*, 506 U.S. at 111. In such circumstances, "[f]ee awards against enforcement officials are run-of-the-mill occurrences." *Supreme Ct. of Va.* v. *Consumers Union of the U.S., Inc.*, 446 U.S. 719, 739 (1980).

Moreover, the Court has made clear that "Congress intended fees to be awarded when a pendent constitutional claim is involved, *even if the * * * claim on which the plaintiff prevailed is one for which fees cannot be awarded under the [Attorney's Fees'] Act.*" *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 132 n.15 (emphasis added). See *id.* at 129 ("Nothing in the language of § 1988 conditions the District Court's power to award fees on full litigation of the issues or on a judicial determination that the plaintiff's rights have been violated."). Under the *Maher* rule, the Court subsequently held, "a prevailing party who asserts substantial *but unaddressed* constitutional claims is entitled to attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988." *Smith* v. *Robinson*, 468 U.S. 992, 1004 (1984) (emphasis added). As a consequence, "the fact that a plaintiff has prevailed on one of two or more alternative bases for relief does not prevent an award of fees for the unaddressed claims, as long as those claims are reasonably related to the plaintiff's ultimate success. The same rule should apply where an unaddressed constitutional claim provides an alternative, but reasonably related, basis for the plaintiff's ultimate relief." *Id.* at 1007 n.10 (citations omitted).

b. The Ninth Circuit's decision is compelled by the *Maher* rule. In arguing to the contrary, the Commissioner contends only that the rule should apply differently in the unusual factual circumstances of this case, where a lower court rejected both the fee and the non-fee claims before the court that had the last word on the merits ruled for the plaintiff on non-fee grounds while leaving the fee claims unre-

solved. The rule of *Maher*, he asserts, is predicated on the assumption that "the plaintiff would have prevailed on the Section 1983 claim had the plaintiff been allowed to litigate that claim to adjudication." Pet. 8. But "[t]hat assumption," he continues, "is not warranted where the plaintiff has actually litigated, and lost, his Section 1983 claim" before the lower court. *Ibid.*; see *id.* at 13-14.

The Commissioner's argument, however, rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the basis for the *Maher* rule. Pointing to the legislative history of Section 1988, the Court has explained:

> "In some instances, * * * the claim [supporting an award of] fees *may involve a constitutional question which the courts are reluctant to resolve if [a] non-[fee] claim is dispositive*. *Hagans v. Lavine*, 415 U.S. 528 (1974). In such cases, if the claim for which fees may be awarded meets the 'substantiality' test, *see Hagans v. Lavine*, *supra*; *United Mine Workers v. Gibbs*, 383 U.S. 715 (1966), attorney's fees may be allowed even though the court declines to enter judgment for the plaintiff on that claim, so long as the plaintiff prevails on the non-fee claim arising out of a 'common nucleus of operative fact.' *United Mine Wokers v. Gibbs*, *supra*, at 725."

Maher, 448 U.S. at 133 n.15 (quoting H.R. Rep. No. 1558, 94th Cong., 2d Sess. (1976), at 4 n.7 (emphasis added)).

The rule of *Maher* thus is prompted both by general principles of judicial restraint and by the particular policies that underlie Section 1988. The Court has long recognized "the wisdom of the federal policy of avoiding constitutional adjudication where not absolutely essential to disposition of a case." *Hagans* v. *Lavine*, 415 U.S. 528, 547 n.12 (1974). See, *e.g.*, *Superintendent* v. *Hill*, 472 U.S. 445, 450 (1985). If a court's failure to resolve a substantial constitutional claim makes fees unavailable when the plaintiff prevails on a related non-fee claim, courts accordingly would be put to an

unpalatable choice: they either would be obligated to engage in otherwise unnecessary constitutional adjudication simply to resolve the plaintiff's entitlement to fees, or they would have to deny fees to plaintiffs who might well have had meritorious civil rights claims.

As the Ninth Circuit correctly recognized, these concerns apply with full force in a case like this one, where the lower court rejected civil rights claims that later were left unresolved by the higher court that ultimately decided the case.[1] In challenging the Ninth Circuit's holding and arguing to the contrary, the Commissioner commits a basic error when he fails to view the fees issue from the perspective of the court that had the last word on the merits of the claims that underlie the request for fees – in this case, from the perspective of *this* Court. Here, this Court granted review *on all three issues* in the case but ultimately found it unnecessary to address the Commerce and Due Process Clauses only because it disposed of the case by holding the HVIRA invalid under the foreign affairs doctrine. The Court thus had both the fee-generating (Commerce and Due Process Clause) and what we are assuming to be the non-fee (foreign affairs doctrine) claims before it when it decided the merits of plaintiffs' suit. That is precisely what triggers application of the *Maher* rule.

So far as *Maher* is concerned, the Ninth Circuit's intervening ruling on the merits regarding the Commerce Clause and due process claims is wholly immaterial. After all, the point of the *Maher* rule is to avoid having the question of en-

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[1] There is no dispute here that the Commerce and Due Process Clause claims advanced in this case by respondents were substantial. The district court ruled for respondents on both claims. The Eleventh Circuit ruled for respondents on an essentially identical due process claim. See *Gerling Global Reinsurance Corp. of Am.* v. *Gallagher*, 267 F.3d 1228 (11th Cir. 2001). And the United States supported respondents' Commerce and Due Process Clause arguments in this Court.

titlement to fees affect the decision-making processes of the court that is entertaining the merits of the plaintiff's suit by forcing that court to resolve a constitutional claim unnecessarily. But the Commissioner's approach would place courts in just that situation. In this case, for example, the Court found it unnecessary to decide plaintiffs' Commerce and Due Process Clause claims; presumably, the Court found it easier, or preferable, or both, to resolve the case on foreign affairs grounds.[2] If the Commissioner were correct, however, the Court would have been obligated to go on to address one of the remaining constitutional claims (or, at a minimum, to reverse its preferred order of addressing the issues before it) simply to settle the plaintiffs' entitlement to fees. The Commissioner thus would turn *Maher* on its head by having the fee tail wag the merits dog.

Alternatively, if the court resolving the merits does not volunteer to decide superfluous constitutional questions, the Commissioner's rule would have the effect of denying fees to prevailing plaintiffs whose substantial constitutional claims were presented to, but not resolved by, the court that had the last word on the merits. But that, too, is just what the *Maher* rule was designed to prevent. "Congress' purpose in authorizing a fee award for an unaddressed constitutional claim was to avoid penalizing a litigant for the fact that courts are properly reluctant to resolve constitutional questions if a noncon-

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[2] Because the Court's decision turned in part on its construction of executive agreements that it accorded preemptive force (see *Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 420-428), it may have believed that its approach allowed it to avoid the most difficult constitutional issues in the case, even as to the foreign affairs doctrine itself. See *id.* at 419-420 (although "[i]t is a fair question whether respect for the executive foreign relations power requires a categorical choice between the contrasting theories of field and conflict preemption," "the question requires no answer here").

stitutional claim is dispositive." *Smith*, 468 U.S. at 1007. The Commissioner's rule, however, would have precisely that inequitable result whenever a reviewing court finds it unnecessary to reverse an adverse lower-court ruling on the plaintiff's fee-generating claims. Here, for example, the Commissioner would penalize plaintiffs because this Court understandably declined to reach out to decide constitutional questions that were unnecessary to the resolution of the case.

The Commissioner also is wrong in suggesting that there is something anomalous in applying the *Maher* rule when the lower court's analysis rejecting the civil rights claims has not been expressly repudiated by the higher court that ultimately ruled for the plaintiff on non-fee grounds. In this case, after all, this Court *reversed* the Ninth Circuit's judgment and held that at least a portion of its reasoning was incorrect. In those circumstances, it makes perfect sense to say that the remaining portion of the lower court's judgment should not stand as a bar to the award of fees to a party that (a) has obtained all the relief sought and (b) might well have prevailed on the constitutional claims had they been reached by the higher court.[3]

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[3] Moreover, the Commissioner's argument is premised on the false assumption that the Ninth Circuit's Commerce and Due Process Clause holdings continue to "have precedential value." Pet. 19. This Court's reversal of the Ninth Circuit's judgment on the merits means that the court of appeals' prior holdings no longer remain in effect. Cf. *O'Connor v. Donaldson*, 422 U.S. 563, 578 n.12 (1975) ("Of necessity our decision vacating the judgment of the Court of Appeals deprives that court's opinion of precedential effect, leaving this Court's opinion and judgment as the sole law of the case"); see also Pet. App 14. In addition, this Court's analysis in *Garamendi* – which concluded that the HVIRA impeded the Federal Government's ability to "speak with one voice" about Holocaust-era insurance claims and repudiated the Ninth Circuit's view that Congress affirmatively approved state laws like the HVIRA (see 539 U.S. at 427-429) – substantially undermined the analysis used

2. *There Is No Conflict In The Courts Of Appeals On The Issue Presented Here*

The Commissioner gets no further with his carefully phrased argument that "numerous courts have acknowledged that a plaintiff who loses on even a 'substantial' Section 1983 claim that is factually related to a non-fee bearing claim is not entitled to fees." Pet. 14-15. In fact, there is no conflict in the circuits on the question here. In each of the appellate decisions the Commissioner invokes (at Pet. 16-18), the court expressing the *last* word on the merits *rejected* the plaintiff's civil rights claim. In such circumstances, the *Maher* principle simply does not apply because the court that ultimately decided the merits did *not* leave the civil rights issue unresolved. As the Ninth Circuit accordingly recognized in rejecting the Commissioner's reliance on these decisions (see Pet. App. 15-16), a rule intended to keep courts from having to decide constitutional claims unnecessarily has no application in cases where the courts found it appropriate *to* resolve those constitutional claims. But just as obviously, the decisions cited by the Commissioner have no bearing in a case like this one, where the higher court did *not* address the fee-creating claims.[4]

The Ninth Circuit's decision in *Mateyko* v. *Felix*, 924 F.2d 824 (9th Cir.), cert. denied, 502 U.S. 814 (1991), cited

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by the Ninth Circuit to reject respondents' Commerce Clause claim.

[4] This Court's decision in *National Private Truck Council, Inc.* v. *Oklahoma Tax Commission*, 515 U.S. 582 (1995), also invoked by the Commissioner (at Pet. 7, 13, 19, 21), rested on a similar basis. There, the Court held fees unavailable under Section 1988 because, given the nature of the plaintiff's claim, "no relief can be awarded pursuant to § 1983." 515 U.S. at 592. Here, in contrast, there is no doubt that Section 1983 *did* provide a cause of action to advance claims under the Commerce and Due Process Clauses.

by the Commissioner (at Pet. 17-18), is typical of the cases on which he relies. There, the plaintiff brought both state and federal claims. Before the district court, the plaintiff prevailed (in part) on his state law arguments, but lost on his federal claims. See 924 F.2d at 825. The court of appeals expressly affirmed the ruling dismissing the federal claims on the merits. *Id.* at 826. Having done so, the court held that attorneys' fees were unavailable because "all Mateyko's federal claims were decided against him." *Id.* at 828. The other appellate decisions cited by the Commissioner involve similar circumstances. See *Luria Bros. & Co., Inc.* v. *Allen*, 672 F.2d 347, 349, 357 (3d Cir. 1982) (plaintiff prevailed before the district court on both federal and state claims; the court of appeals reversed as to the federal claim and therefore held fees unavailable); *Haywood* v. *Ball*, 634 F.2d 740 (4th Cir. 1980) (fees not available where court of appeals previously had rejected the federal claims, see *Haywood* v. *Ball*, 586 F.2d 996, 998-1000 (4th Cir. 1978)); *Bonner* v. *Guccione*, 178 F.3d 581 (2d Cir. 1999) (fees not available where the relief obtained by the plaintiff on her non-federal claim was not equivalent to relief that she sought on her federal claim); *Reel* v. *Ark. Dept. of Correction*, 672 F.2d 693, 696-697 (8th Cir. 1982) (fees not available where the court of appeals remanded the federal issue for further consideration); *Raley* v. *Fraser*, 747 F.2d 287, 290-292 (5th Cir. 1984) (fees not available where the court of appeals rejected the civil rights claim).

In fact, in the almost 30 years since Section 1988 was enacted, it appears that the issue raised by the Commissioner here – availability of fees when the fee-bearing claim is rejected by a lower court but left open by the higher court – has been addressed in only two appellate decisions: this case and a prior ruling of the Ninth Circuit, which reached the same result. See *Carreras* v. *City of Anaheim*, 768 F.2d 1039, 1050 (9th Cir. 1985), abrogated on other grounds by *Los Angeles Alliance for Survival* v. *City of Los Angeles*, 993 P.2d

334 (Cal. 2000); Pet. App. 11 (reading *Carreras* "to support an award of fees where, as here, the court of highest authority to hear a case avoids resolution of a fee-supporting federal claim").[5] The great infrequency with which the issue of *Maher*'s application to the unusual factual setting of this case has arisen militates strongly against review; it is difficult to characterize an issue that has reached a court of appeals only

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[5] The issue appears to have been addressed in only one other reported decision, *Am. Auto. Mfrs. Ass'n* v. *Cahill*, 53 F. Supp. 2d 174, 180-181 (N.D.N.Y. 1999) ("*AAMA*"), which is cited by the Commissioner at Pet. 9, 15-16. In *AAMA*, the plaintiff advanced both statutory and constitutional arguments; the district court rejected both claims; on appeal, the Second Circuit ruled for the plaintiff on statutory grounds without reaching the constitutional issue. See *id.* at 178-179. The district court then held that fees were not available under Section 1988 even though the court of appeals had left open the constitutional issue. *AAMA*, however, is of limited value to the Commissioner. This Court "will not grant certiorari to review a decision of a federal court of appeals merely because it is in direct conflict on a point of federal law with a decision rendered by a district court, whether in the same circuit or in another circuit." R. Stern, *et al.*, SUPREME COURT PRACTICE 237 (8th ed. 2002). Moreover, the district court in *AAMA* acknowledged that there was no case law clearly supporting its analysis (53 F. Supp. 2d at 180) – and, because the *AAMA* court *did* award fees on the plaintiff's statutory claims (see *id.* at 182-186), the Second Circuit had no opportunity to review the district court's conclusions about Section 1988. In addition, the district court offered an alternative ground for its holding that the plaintiff was not entitled to fees on its unreviewed constitutional claims; the plaintiff received "far narrower" relief on its statutory claims than it had sought under the Constitution. *Id.* at 181. In this context, any tension between the Ninth Circuit's decision in this case and a single aberrant district court ruling (which, so far as we know, has never been followed) does not provide a basis for the grant of review by this Court.

twice in three decades as "an important question of federal law" that should be settled by this Court. Sup. Ct. R. 10(c).

3. The Commissioner's Remaining Merits-Based Challenges To The Court Of Appeals' Decision Lack Substance

The various other challenges that the Commissioner raises to the merits of the decision below lack substance and certainly do not warrant review. The Commissioner is wrong in contending that the Ninth Circuit's decision makes the grant of certiorari "a fee-generating event." Pet. 25; see *id.* at 12, 23-24. As the court of appeals explained, "[t]he grant of certiorari does not factor into the prevailing plaintiff calculation – only when the Supreme Court (or the court of highest authority to hear a case) rules in favor of a plaintiff and grants him the relief he sought will that plaintiff be considered prevailing under § 1988." Pet. App. 15 n.2. This Court's grant of certiorari does not dictate the award of fees; under the holding below, it is the Court's ultimate disposition on the merits of the fee-bearing claims before it that determines whether fees are available.

By the same token, the Commissioner is incorrect in arguing that the Ninth Circuit's ruling will frustrate Section 1983's policy by "encourag[ing] plaintiffs to attach meritless Section 1983 claims to routine non-fee bearing claims" in hopes of obtaining fees if they prevail on the non-fee portion of the case. Pet. 9-10. If a civil rights claim truly is insubstantial and is advanced abusively simply to generate entitlement to fees, it would be an easy enough matter for an appellate court to reject that claim on the merits. It is notable that the Commissioner's concern has not proved to be a problem for district courts applying the *Maher* rule, even though the Commissioner agrees that, in the absence of an appeal, fees *are* available when the district court rules for the plaintiff on non-fee grounds while leaving civil rights claims unresolved.

Indeed, it is the Commissioner's rule that would create perverse incentives. Under his approach, a plaintiff who lost on both a state law and a federal civil rights claim in district court, but who believed that it had strong appellate arguments on both claims, might forgo advancing its state-law claim on appeal for fear that the court of appeals would reverse on that ground – which, according to the Commissioner, would make attorneys' fees unavailable. And most fundamentally, denying fees in these circumstances "would frustrate section 1988's purpose to encourage private parties to vindicate their federal civil rights." *Mateyko*, 924 F.2d at 828-829. As *Maher* and *Smith* demonstrate, this policy is effectuated when fees are awarded to a plaintiff who advances unresolved fee-generating claims but prevails in the district court on a non-fee claim. That policy applies in precisely the same way in cases like this one; the happenstance that there was an intervening adverse decision on the fee-generating claim that was left unresolved by the court that ultimately ruled in the plaintiff's favor has no bearing on the utility of awarding fees to prevailing plaintiffs who advance substantial but ultimately undecided constitutional issues. Such an award "'furthers the Congressional goal of encouraging suits to vindicate constitutional rights without undermining the longstanding judicial policy of avoiding unnecessary decision of important constitutional issues.'" Pet. App. 16 (quoting *Maher*, 448 U.S. at 133).

In fact, this case is one in which there should be no doubt about the propriety of a fee award. The California legislature was warned that it was proposing to pass a statute of dubious constitutionality. When the HVIRA nevertheless was enacted, the Commissioner enforced it in the most aggressive manner, although he was advised that the law was constitutionally flawed and was urged to refrain by federal officials. See pages 2-3, *supra*. After respondents brought suit to vindicate their constitutional rights, the Commissioner litigated the issue relentlessly, forcing respondents to take two trips to

the court of appeals and one to this Court before they finally prevailed on the merits and obtained complete success in their constitutional challenge. These considerations – where the plaintiff is forced to engage in years of burdensome, time-consuming, and expensive litigation to defeat unconstitutional enforcement action – are precisely the ones for which Section 1988 was enacted.

4. The Question Whether The Executive Agreement At Issue In This Case Is Enforceable Under Section 1983 Was Not Decided By The Court Of Appeals And Does Not Warrant Review

The Commissioner also urges the Court to decide whether the Federal Government's preemption of state law pursuant to the Constitution's foreign affairs power creates "rights" under Section 1983. Pet. 25-29. But that issue is not now presented in the case. As the Commissioner acknowledges (at Pet. 25), the Ninth Circuit expressly declined to resolve the question. See Pet. App. 9, 17.[6] Moreover, there is no conflict on this issue in the lower courts. Indeed, so far as we are aware, this case is the only one *ever* to address whether the German Foundation Agreement – or, for that matter, the Constitution's foreign affairs principle – is enforceable under Section 1983. The question presented by the Commissioner therefore plainly does not warrant review.

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[6] As respondents argued below, the foreign affairs principle and the German Foundation Agreement – which was designed, in relevant part, to advance "the [German] companies' interest in securing 'legal peace'" (*Garamendi*, 539 U.S. at 423 (citation omitted)) – *do* create rights, privileges, or immunities that are enforceable under Section 1983.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the petition for a writ of certiorari should be denied.

Respectfully submitted.

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In The
Supreme Court of the United States

JOHN GARAMENDI, in his capacity as Commissioner of Insurance for the State of California,

Petitioner,

v.

GERLING GLOBAL REINSURANCE CORPORATION OF AMERICA, US BRANCH, et al.,

Respondents.

On Petition For A Writ Of Certiorari To The United States Court Of Appeals For The Ninth Circuit

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The insurers' brief in opposition to the Commissioner's certiorari petition ("Opp."), if anything, highlights the reasons why this Court should grant review to address an unprecedented decision of the Ninth Circuit ("*Gerling III*"). That decision conflicts with the language and intent of an important federal statute, conflicts with settled principles articulated by this Court and numerous others, and threatens to severely burden government defendants who will now face additional, meritless Section 1983 claims brought by plaintiffs buoyed by the prospect of recovering attorneys' fees even if they lose those claims on the merits.

1. The insurers say that "the relevant rules in this area of the law have long been settled and noncontroversial." Opp. at 6. The Commissioner agrees. Until *Gerling III*, no one would have reasonably thought that a plaintiff who loses his Section 1983 claim on the merits has "prevailed" on that claim, entitling the plaintiff to an award of attorneys' fees under Section 1988. Congress never authorized such an award, and *Maher v. Gagne*, 448 U.S. 122 (1980), certainly does not permit that result. *Maher* only permits an award of fees to a plaintiff who has not had the opportunity to litigate his Section 1983 claim to judgment; it does not grant a windfall recovery of fees to a plaintiff who has litigated and lost that claim. Presumably, until *Gerling III*, plaintiffs have understood that reality and have not often pressed for the recovery of fees after having lost their Section 1983 claim. *Gerling III* now opens that door.

2. The insurers dismissively characterize their loss on their Section 1983 claims as a "wholly immaterial" "happenstance." Opp. at 9, 16. But that loss is anything

but immaterial. It reflects a judicial determination, by a federal court of appeals, that the insurers were not entitled to relief under Section 1983 as a matter of law. Contrary to the insurers' assertion (Opp. at 16), their Section 1983 claims are not "unresolved." Accordingly, there is no basis for considering the insurers to be "prevailing parties" on those claims for purposes of Section 1988 fees. See *Nat'l Private Truck Council, Inc. v. Okla. Tax Comm'n*, 515 U.S. 582, 592 (1995).

3. The insurers assert that unless they are awarded fees here, they will be unfairly "penalized." Opp. at 1, 11. To the contrary, if *Gerling III* is allowed to stand, it is the Commissioner and other defendants who defeat Section 1983 claims brought against them who will be unfairly penalized. *Gerling III* creates an assumption, never before recognized, that the court that ruled against a plaintiff on the merits of his Section 1983 claim was wrong and that the plaintiff would prevail on that failed claim were a reviewing court to address it.

There is no basis for such an assumption. Neither Congress nor this Court has ever suggested that losing litigants are entitled to that assumption. And the fact that the Section 1983 claim satisfies the minimal "substantiality" test (*i.e.*, it is not frivolous) hardly justifies the assumption that the lower court was wrong on the merits and that the plaintiff would prevail on appeal.

4. *Gerling III* has significant practical consequences that justify this Court's immediate attention. Amici, insurance regulators and local governments, have expressed serious concerns about the impact of this unprecedented decision. By expanding the right to attorneys' fees to parties who have lost their Section 1983 claims, *Gerling*

III presents the very real dangers of chilling regulatory activity, burdening local government with costly additional litigation, and exposing public agencies and local government to unwarranted fee awards.[1] Following *Gerling III*, plaintiffs with little prospect of prevailing on a Section 1983 claim have every reason to add such a claim to a run-of-the-mill tort lawsuit or challenge to an administrative action, since they may now be awarded fees even if they lose the Section 1983 claim.

The insurers' response to this increase in meritless Section 1983 suits exposes the fallacy of their position. They say that appellate courts can deal with such claims by addressing and rejecting them on the merits. Opp. at 15. But that is precisely the kind of judicial work that they elsewhere say the courts should avoid for prudential reasons. See Opp. at 8-9.

5. The insurers' protests notwithstanding (Opp. at 15), *Gerling III* also reflects a significant intrusion on this Court's certiorari process. As the insurers themselves conceded in their Ninth Circuit briefing (App. 30-31) and Judge Graber inferred in her concurrence (App. 18), this Court's grant of certiorari on the Section 1983 claims was

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[1] *Gerling III* is not limited to situations in which a plaintiff loses both the fee and non-fee claims in the lower court and then prevails on the non-fee claim in the appellate court without obtaining an appellate ruling on the fee claim. As the National Association of Insurance Commissioners explains in its amicus brief (at page 6), *Gerling III* also applies when the plaintiff has won on its non-fee claim in the lower court. Significantly, *Gerling III* will chill a defendant's willingness to appeal on that non-fee claim, since the plaintiff can then cross-appeal on the Section 1983 claim and recover fees if the appellate court affirms the defendant's loss on the non-fee claim and does not address the Section 1983 issue. *Id.*

essential to the award of fees. Without that grant, the Ninth Circuit could not have characterized those claims as "unaddressed" for purposes of applying *Maher* to this case and ruled that the insurers were entitled to an award of attorneys' fees under Section 1988.

The insurers also argue that this Court's grant of certiorari is not a fee-generating event under *Gerling III* because "it is the Court's ultimate disposition on the merits of the fee-bearing claims before it that determines whether fees are available." Opp. at 15. That argument is puzzling, since this Court expressly did not address the merits of the insurers' Section 1983 claims in *Garamendi*, and the Court's decision not to address those claims is precisely what the insurers argue provides the basis for a fee award under *Maher*.

6. The insurers are simply wrong in asserting that the Ninth Circuit's Commerce Clause and due process rulings do not continue to have precedential value. Opp. at 11 n.3. They cite a case, *O'Connor v. Donaldson*, 422 U.S. 563, 578 n.12 (1975), that holds only that a lower court opinion loses its precedential value when it has been vacated. However, the law recognizes a critical distinction between vacating and reversing a lower court judgment. Reversal of a decision on one ground does not affect the precedential value of the balance of the decision. See *Central Pines Land Co. v. United States*, 274 F.3d 881, 893-894 and n.57 (5th Cir. 2001). Were this not the law, there would be no point in referring to a decision as "reversed on other grounds," as no aspect of the decision would have any value. The insurers simply ignore this critical distinction.

This Court reversed the Ninth Circuit on foreign affairs preemption grounds only; it did not vacate the Ninth Circuit's Commerce Clause and due process rulings. As Judge Graber recognized (App. 19 n.1), the Ninth Circuit's Commerce Clause and due process rulings continue to have precedential effect.

7. Section 1988 permits a plaintiff to recover fees only if he has prevailed on his Section 1983 claim.[3] Congress, and this Court in *Maher*, recognized that there are limited circumstances where it is perceived to be unfair to deny fees to a plaintiff who has never had the opportunity to obtain a ruling on his Section 1983 claim. Neither Congress nor any other court has ever suggested, let alone held as the Ninth Circuit has in *Gerling III*, that a plaintiff who has lost his Section 1983 claim on the merits in a lower court is entitled to fees when a reviewing court does not address that failed claim.

The *Maher* rule, contrary to the insurers' repeated suggestion (Opp. at 8-9, 12), is not one that awards fees simply as a convenience to courts that wish to avoid constitutional issues. Instead, it addresses a specific and limited perceived unfairness visited on a plaintiff who has never had his day in court on his Section 1983 claim. That unfairness does not exist where the plaintiff has litigated and lost his Section 1983 claim in at least one court.

Under *Gerling III*, however, that loss is ignored as though it never happened. As the amici have expressed,

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[3] A plaintiff must prevail (or be assumed to have prevailed) on his Section 1983 claim to recover fees under Section 1988. In *Farrar v. Hobby*, 506 U.S. 103, 106, 107, 112 (1992), cited by the insurers (Opp. at 6-7), the plaintiff established that his civil rights had been violated.

that perverse result will improperly chill regulatory activity, and expand litigation against and impose significant risks upon local governments and regulators.

The petition for certiorari should be granted.[3]

Respectfully submitted,

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[3] The issue of the insurers' entitlement to fees is ripe and is not in an interlocutory posture. The parties agreed to adjudicate the entitlement issue prior to any proceedings to determine any fee award amount, and the district court and Ninth Circuit have proceeded to decide the entitlement issue.